

ALEXANDER CHAKOVSKY

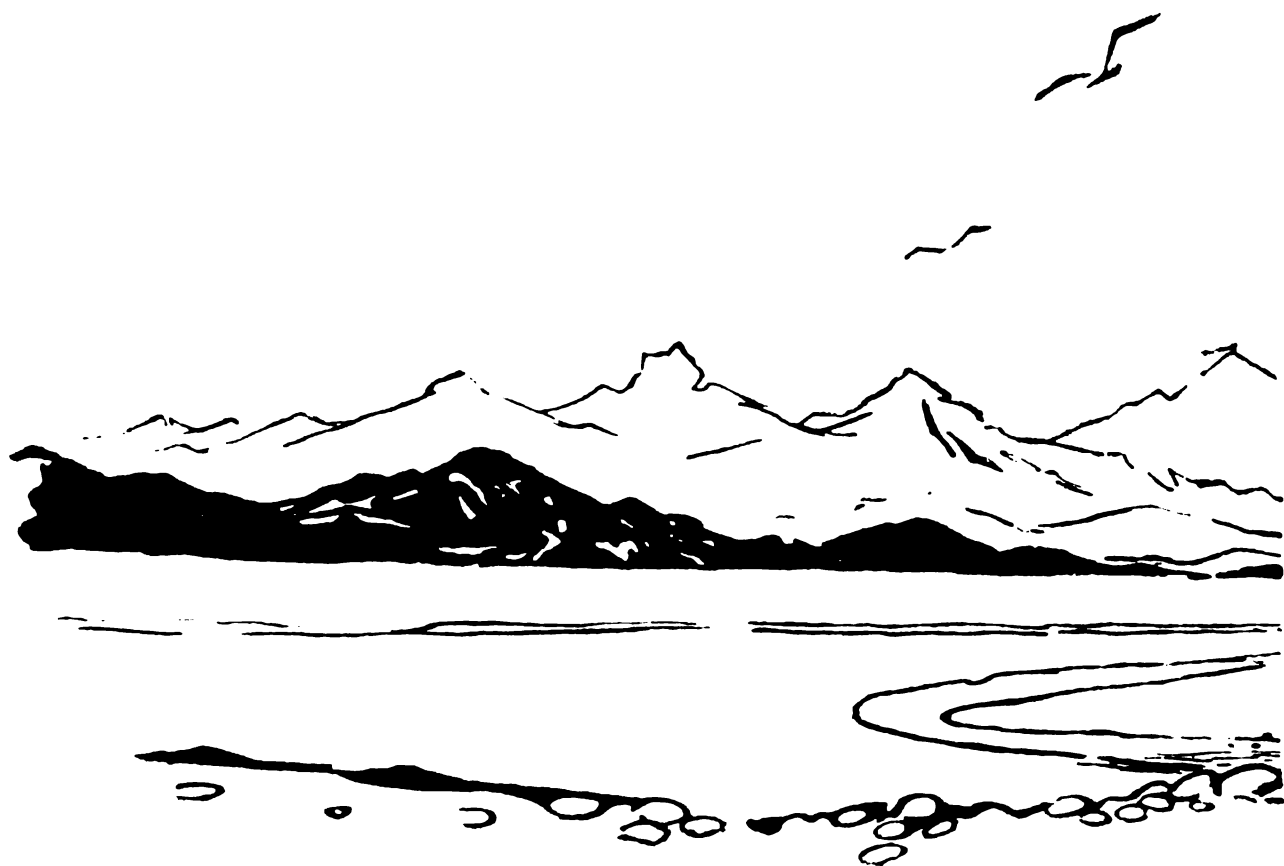
A YEAR OF LIFE



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ИЗДАТЕЛЬСТВО ЛИТЕРАТУРЫ НА ИНОСТРАННЫХ ЯЗЫКАХ

Москва

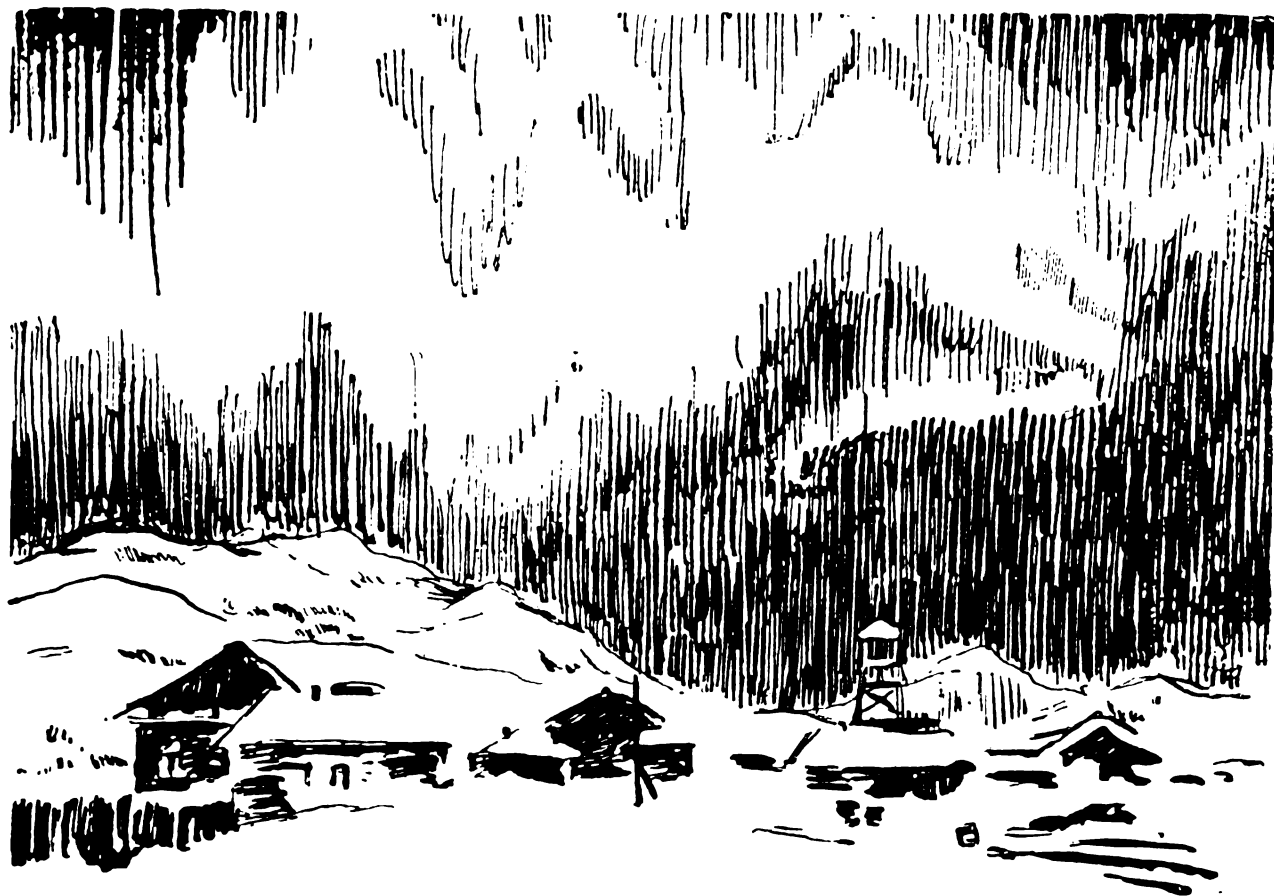
ALEXANDER CHAKOVSKY

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I

ARRIVED in Zapolyarsk in June 1954. The town had only one hotel, not counting the Fishermen's Club, which was always crowded.

The hotel also turned out to be full up. I couldn't get a bed, let alone a room to myself.

"Wait around," said the woman at the desk, "by morning we may be able to squeeze you in."

I left my passport at the desk, my suitcase in the cloak-room, and went out.

Late as it was, there were many people sitting and strolling about in the little garden near the hotel and it took me some time to find a vacant bench.

The view was splendid. Straight in front of me stretched the sea or rather the bay, from which a chill wind blew. Smoke curled from the funnels of steamers in the harbour. Derricks swung bales of cargo in the air.

The sun was still high over the horizon and the rippling surface of the bay sparkled brightly; on the opposite shore, through a pinkish haze, could be seen mountains down which ran narrow veins of snow.

It was getting on towards midnight, but the town was not asleep. People sauntered about in the garden and along the street. A young man, most likely a student, settled down with a book on the bench next to mine.

I set off to wander through the town.

It proved to be large and sprawling. I walked along a broad street lined with new three- and four-storey buildings and reached a stretch of wasteland. Here two excavators clanged as they dug into the sides of a foundation pit. The onlookers' heads moved up and down to the motions of the scoop.

Three sailors from the fishing fleet passed me, swaying slightly, and turned in the direction of the hotel. Young men and girls sat on benches or porch steps. Through open windows came the strains of gramophones. On the vacant lots children were playing rounders. In a shooting-range shots cracked from small-bore rifles.

I had to send a telegram to Moscow. I had written it out while still in the train pulling into Zapolyarsk. It had to be sent at once: so many of my hopes rested on it.

The telegraph office was also full of people. There were no more than five or six persons queued up at the telegram counter, but a full score were besieging the little window where long-distance telephone calls were or-

dered. These, I could tell by their cap badges, were mostly fishermen, some of them obviously tipsy. The clients for the telephone demanded to be put through to Moscow, Leningrad, Arkhangelsk, Vyazma, Podlipki, Shchekotovka and goodness knows where else; they shoved wads of notes through the window, ordering "urgent" or "super-super urgent" calls, anything to get through straight away, "because we're putting out to sea tomorrow, we'll be afloat for thirty days, and they haven't fixed up telephones on boats yet."

I handed the clerk my telegram and waited patiently while she marked it up and put it on the edge of her desk. I would have liked to see the telegram collected, but the people behind me were getting restive and I was elbowed away from the window.

I returned to the hotel. There I found people waiting for rooms, seated in all the chairs and armchairs and pacing the length of the corridors. I picked my way to the desk between suitcases, travelling boxes and bales. This time I was in luck.

I got a small room with an iron bed, a locker, a chair and the black disk of a loudspeaker on the wall.

I was only staying one night in Zapolyarsk. The train that would take me to my place of work was leaving the following evening.

There were no blinds over the windows and the sun was still shining brightly. I could not sleep.

But had it been pitch dark that night I would still not have been able to sleep. I stood on the threshold of a new life, and a feeling of joy, expectation and great hope welled up within me.

I went to the window.

Clouds had gathered in the sky. The sun had turned red and was a very distinct round. The sunlit fringes of the clouds stood out clearly. On the molten metal of the

cove a small boat was sailing, looking as though it might burst into flames at any moment.

Twenty-four hours later I was in a small miners' settlement.

I remember standing in a narrow street in the settlement. The sun was bright in the sky, with the arctic day at its height. Yet my watch told me it was nearly midnight. In Central Russia the sun is generally yellow on a cloudless summer day, burning with a white heat, but here it was fiery red in the light northern night.

The settlement was surrounded by grim, forbidding mountains. In some places there were narrow tongues of snow, like streamlets running down the slopes. The gaps between the spurs seemed to be filled not with mist but with a wild and boundless sea in which the peaks floated like icebergs.

But there was no sea—the Arctic Ocean lay miles and miles away. What I was looking at was really mist faintly tinged by sunlight.

I had come to the North, to a place within the Arctic Circle, to the edge of the world, and once there I was eager to take in everything: snow and bears, the cold ocean, the arctic day and the arctic night.

At intervals along each side of the street stood wooden houses. Between them grew a chalky-white plant, somewhat like a tall mossy growth. Later I learned that it was Iceland moss, the favourite food of the reindeer.

The street was deserted—the settlement was inhabited by mine workers, and those who were not at work in the mountains at that hour had gone to bed.

A red sun, almost sheer mountains, sombre and grim against the seas of mist, and peaceful homes—that was the world I saw.

From somewhere in the distance came the sound of a radio bringing the muffled chimes of the Kremlin clock.

It was odd and extraordinary to hear those midnight chimes with the sun shining.

I spent the night in a small hotel and early next morning set off for the management office of the mining works. At the personnel department, where I handed my papers to a secretary, I was told to wait.

Ten minutes later a flimsy office door, unevenly lined with bubbled leatherette, opened and through it came a man wearing calf-length leather boots, riding breeches, and an unbuttoned jacket which revealed an embroidered Ukrainian shirt belted with a narrow Caucasian strap. This was the head of the personnel department. Under one arm he carried a cardboard file.

No sooner had he stepped into the room than he inquired:

“Engineer Arefyev?”

I flushed. True, a month before I had qualified as an engineer, but till that moment no one had called me engineer in earnest, and in such a casual, ordinary, matter-of-fact tone.

“Let’s go to the managing director,” he said without waiting for me to reply. “Your institute has sent us your papers.” He tapped the file under his arm.

“But why are you taking your suitcase with you?” he asked, noticing with surprise that in my confusion I had picked up my things.

We went up a cement stairway to the next floor and turned down a long corridor. And all the time we were walking the two words “Engineer Arefyev” rang in my ears.

How pleasant it was to hear these words—“Engineer Arefyev speaking.... See that Engineer Arefyev’s orders are carried out....”

So intoxicating were these words that the next moment it seemed to me that I was uttering them aloud. You fool! Acting like a kid. I cursed myself and stole a glance at my companion.

He had heard nothing, of course. He was walking a few paces ahead of me, his shaven head bent, his neck thrust forward a little, as though he were getting ready to gore someone.

We went into an office, and I saw the managing director. A big, heavy man, he was sitting at an incongruously small desk. On another desk, an even smaller one, stood the telephones—two of the usual sort, one field telephone and a microphone.

The head of the personnel department stood behind the managing director.

"Sit down. Why are you standing?" asked the managing director affably, though, I thought, with a faint touch of irony, as he thumbed through my file. The voice was unexpectedly thin for a man of his bulk.

"Sit down," he repeated, motioning towards two chairs with flat wooden backs. "When did you arrive?"

Continuing to look through my papers, he muttered with an occasional glance at me:

"I see ... the Moscow Transport Institute ... candidate member of the Party.... Single?" he inquired. "Well, why are you blushing? It's easy enough to get married. Much easier than to get unmarried. It says here that you've asked to be sent to work in our territory. Is that so?"

"I asked to be sent to the Arctic," I replied.

"Good for you! Why do you speak in such a quiet voice? A miner speaks in a loud voice. A tunnelling engineer—that's a big thing. Well," he said, banging the folder shut and pushing it aside scornfully as though it were of no account, "what if you go to the mine? That,

too, is in our zone. For one thing, it's near the settlement, there's a cinema there, dancing, and the 'washer.' Have you learned to drink vodka yet?"

Without waiting for me to reply, he turned to the head of the personnel department.

"The Minister gave me hell the other day. 'What's all this drinking going on in the Arctic?' he demanded. 'It's time you put a stop to the idea that if you're a miner, especially in the North, you've got to drink.' "

"We don't do enough cultural and educational work," replied the other calmly. "The result of our remoteness from cultural centres."

"Our 'remoteness' be damned," muttered the managing director. And turning to me again, he asked, "Well, how about the mine? We need engineers there too. The tunnel's eight kilometres away from the mining settlement. In winter the snow-drifts will cut you off from us for weeks. You'll live like a bear in its den. Make up your mind."

I felt like one who has been itching to get to the front, and after finally getting there is suddenly sent to the rear, to a safe spot near headquarters.

"No!" I said firmly.

"What?"

"No!" I shouted in such a loud and resounding voice that I felt quite embarrassed.

"Now your voice sounds good to me," the managing director said chuckling. "Then you're going to the tunnel?"

"I am. I'm a tunneller and I want to build tunnels." I tried to speak calmly and reasonably to soften the unfortunate impression given by my childish outburst.

"That's the spirit!" said the managing director approvingly. "You've decided well. We need you badly at the tunnel."

He rose with unexpected agility.

“Do you know what your job will be?” he asked, in a more formal tone.

I was on the point of replying, because at the ministry I had been told more or less in detail of the significance of the tunnel under construction. But not wanting to sound too bumptious, I said:

“In general terms.”

“Until you get settled everything will appear to you in ‘general terms.’ In short, go and talk to the chief engineer about it.”

“What stage of the work are we at now?” I asked.

“At the first—on the sector we propose to send you to. On the western sector they’ve already begun tunneling. Next Monday we’ll start sending men and equipment to your sector on the eastern side. Your job is to start work as soon as possible, to drive a gallery and to catch up with Kramov on the western side.”

“One more question,” I said. “In what capacity shall I work?”

“‘In what capacity’? Why, as sector chief. And what job did you have in mind?”

I coughed to hide my excitement. I had not expected an important appointment like that.

My embarrassment did not pass unnoticed.

“To tell the truth,” said the managing director, “we’re taking a risk. It’s a responsible job. Of course, I’ve faith in your honours diploma and the recommendation Professor Mashov gave you. We have all studied his textbooks.”

The managing director drummed his fingers on the desk and added:

“For the time being we’ll consider you acting chief.” And I realized that he had decided this on the spot, after having had a look at me. “If you do well we’ll drop the ‘acting.’”

He bent towards the microphone and said in an unexpectedly low voice:

"Operator . . . get me the chief of the building department!" A green light flashed on on the little table and from somewhere out of the night a loudspeaker boomed:

"Falaleyev speaking."

"Listen, Falaleyev," said the managing director, "a new engineer has arrived."

"Oh yes," said the loudspeaker.

"He's been sent from the Moscow Transport Institute."

"I see!" came the reply, in somewhat sinking tones.

"He's going to work at the tunnel."

"Pavel Semyonovich," interrupted the invisible Falaleyev, "the mine's the place for him. He needs to get his bearings, to learn things. Why send an inexperienced pup to the tunnel? He'll flounder there."

The managing director snatched the microphone roughly from the table and shouted:

"You and I were pups once too. D'you understand that?"

"I understand"—this was followed by a sigh.

"Then make arrangements for him to be driven to the sector on Monday. Take him there yourself!" ordered the managing director in a sudden burst of anger, adding in a low voice, "That's all I have to say."

He gave the microphone another angry bounce and without changing his tone said to me:

"Go and see the chief engineer!"

The head of the personnel department gathered up the folder with the papers from the desk and arranged the sheets neatly. We walked to the door.

"I wish you luck," the managing director said to me.

I spent the whole day at the works and got back to the hotel only in the evening.

The receptionist sat in a dark distant corner behind a table spread with a newspaper. Behind the woman stood a stuffed brown bear on its hind legs, its front paws stretched over her head as though guarding her. I noticed that these paws were in big blue mitts. The effect was unexpected and amusing.

I was famished and asked whether there was a buffet at the hotel.

The receptionist, a middle-aged, sullen-looking woman wearing a kerchief on her head, replied that there was no buffet and that hotel residents took their breakfast and dinner at the works canteen.

"What about supper?" I asked.

"Doctors say that supper is bad for the health," she replied without a smile. She was one of those people who look even grimmer than usual when they say something funny.

"Is there nowhere I can get a snack?" I asked.

"Well, there's the 'washer.' "

"And what might this 'washer' be?"

"If you like a pub, a beer-house," she explained, amazed at my ignorance.

"Why is it called a 'washer'?" I went on gaily, happy at the prospect of stilling my hunger.

"Because of its shape—it's like a washer. Just go down the avenue and you'll see it before you've walked a kilometre."

The fact that she called the narrow street of the settlement an "avenue" and that the local bar was built in such strange style cheered me up completely.

"One more question. Why does the bear wear mitts?"

At last something like a smile flickered over the woman's grim, stony face. She said:

"People who stay here shake hands with him, greeting him when they arrive and saying 'good-bye' when they leave. They're shaking his paw all the time. And

when they get back from the 'washer' they're liable as not to shake it for a whole hour. That's more than any paw can stand. So the manager gave orders for the bear to wear mitts."

"A capital idea!" I exclaimed, hardly able to keep a straight face. I left the hotel and walked down the "avenue."

The "washer" stood on a bit of wasteland.

It was an odd-looking, ungainly structure. To tell the truth it looked more like a huge oil tank than a washer.

Its walls were painted a dull green and it had no windows. The entrance was evidently round the other side.

It was a strange sensation to walk out of the arctic day into the dusk of evening. In the sunlit street the nocturnal stillness had been particularly striking. But here I was greeted by a hubbub of voices, a clatter of plates and the swish of beer as it was drawn from the pumps. The air was cool and damp.

At first I could distinguish nothing but a small, dim bulb dangling from a bit of flex, enveloped in clouds of tobacco smoke. Then through the pall of smoke I discerned huge beer barrels, which stood against the walls and did duty as tables. Around each barrel stood several men, most of them wearing padded coats or canvas tunics and high rubber boots.

Barrels were arranged in a semi-circle at each end of the bar, which was knocked together from rough planks. Tin plates containing slices of cheese and smoked sausage stood on the counter and over these delicacies presided a stout woman with a pock-marked face and extremely thick lips. She wore a rather grubby jacket over a padded coat, which made her look all the bulkier.

I walked up to the bar.

The barmaid was enthroned on a barrel; to the right of her stood another barrel, apparently containing beer, for a beer-pump protruded from it. At the bar stood a

man holding a mug of foaming beer, and the barmaid was pouring him a tot of vodka into a greenish tumbler.

Then she took up an empty mug from the counter and began to pump beer into it. With each motion of her hand the beer foamed and spurted.

She pushed the full mug across to me.

I felt ill at ease in these unfamiliar surroundings and muttered:

"No. A couple of sandwiches, if you don't mind."

She raised her fair eyebrows slightly, took a tin plate from a side counter, put some sandwiches on it, and without a word set it before me.

"Thanks," I said, a little heartened. "I suppose I can take them with me. I've got some paper here."

Taking a folded newspaper out of my pocket I began to wrap the sandwiches in it.

"Hey—that won't do!" a loud voice rang out.

It came from one of the customers standing round the barrel nearest the bar—a young man, grey with rock-dust, in padded trousers and a canvas jacket which was unbuttoned, revealing a bare chest, also quite grey with dust. He was slightly tipsy.

"The firm doesn't sell food to be taken out," the man went on. "Maybe you don't think the company's good enough for you?"

I stopped in the midst of wrapping up the sandwiches and looked at him in some bewilderment.

"Or maybe you've run out of hard cash?" the man asked in even louder tones. "Say, Maria Petrovna, pour the chief a mug of beer with a nip of vodka. Have a drink on a miner."

"Please don't, why should you do that?" I mumbled putting the sandwiches back on the plate. "That's not the reason at all. I just wanted—But all the same, I'll have that mug of beer, please." I spoke so loudly to

the barmaid that I surprised myself and added more quietly, "But leave out the vodka."

The young man nudged his neighbour and made room for me. I squeezed my way through to the barrel.

There was a heated conversation in progress at the next barrel. The men were arguing about something, interrupting each other, speaking about hoses, hawsers and all sorts of other contraptions, "the like of which is to be got neither in nor on the mountain," and cursed some time-keeper. "An ill-tempered bitch who bares her teeth every time she opens her mouth"—were the words I caught.

But the men round our barrel lapsed into a strained silence as soon as I approached and set down my mug. I continued to hold the plate of sandwiches in my hand: there was no room for it on the barrel.

The young man who had first addressed me raised his glass and said loudly:

"Cheerio!"

All the others raised their glasses. I took up my beer-mug.

"Taking it with the beer?" came a question across the barrel from a middle-aged man with a bushy moustache, who was wearing a padded jacket also covered with rock-dust.

"Taking what?" I asked him.

"A cocktail, an American drink, what we call 'yorsh,'" said the man, and he made a motion as though to pour vodka into the beer.

"No, no!" I said, now thoroughly at a loss. "This is just beer, there's no vodka in it. And I don't really want the beer either."

"We drink beer in these parts only as a chaser," said a third man crushingly. He had a huge red scar like a burn on his face.

"I see," I muttered and raised the mug to my lips. I

drank deeply, stealing glances at the men as I drained the mug to see if they were watching me.

To drain a mug of cold beer at a draught is no easy matter but I did it. Bringing the empty mug down with a bang on the barrel, I asked:

“Are you drilling rock, comrades?”

“We dance in the ballet,” replied the first young man.

“Sometimes we drill and sometimes it is we who get drilled,” the elder man with the moustache answered me, ignoring the other’s jibe.

“What do you mean by that?” I asked.

“Simple enough!” put in the man with the scar. “We drill it with a drill but it needs no drill to get its own back on us.”

“Is the rock very tough? Iolite?” I went on questioning.

The man with the moustache did not reply. Winking slyly at the others, the first young man chanted the refrain of an old Siberian song: “Tell us your tale, vagabond.” He added sulkily, “Tell him, he wants to know everything.”

“Oh, it doesn’t matter,” I said hastily, sensing that the conversation was not going well. “If you don’t feel like it don’t answer my questions. I saw you were drillers from the mountains, and that you’d come straight from work.”

My words had a sudden and unexpected effect on the men, one that puzzled me greatly. The first young man swung round at me, flung open his canvas jacket and putting his hands on his bare chest said resentfully:

“We’re not dressed properly, you say? What would you have us wear to the ‘washer’? A suit, bow-tie and all the rest of it?”

“Don’t get so worked up,” the man with the scar continued glumly. “We’ve no place to swagger round here, and no one to show off to.”

"Listen, comrades, why do you get me wrong like that," I broke in loudly. "Tomorrow maybe, I'll look just like you. I've come here to work. On the tunnel. And—"

"On the tunnel?" the first young man cried with exaggerated joy. He was quite drunk by now. "You've come of your own accord?"

"What d'you mean by that?" I asked.

"Let's drink to that!" he said in the same exuberant manner. He did not reply to my question, but struck the barrel with the flat of his hand and shouted to the barmaid, "Mar ... Petrovna, a two-hundred-and-fifty grammes charge right in this drill-hole!"

He pointed to my empty mug. And trying to make my voice sound both rough and casual I said:

"Pour in all round, I'm standing treat!"

But neither the barmaid nor my own neighbour heard me: the shrill notes of an accordion drowned all voices. Someone had started playing at the far end of the bar, and the young man who had first spoken to me flung off his jacket and, bare to the waist, sprang from behind the barrel, clapped his hands, and broke into a tap dance. He was wearing rubber boots so he could not heel-tap; all one could hear were dullish rhythmical stamping sounds.

One or two men glanced lazily at the bouncing figure as at a boring and long familiar sight. Most people did not even turn their heads.

The young man danced on, wildly oblivious of his surroundings. He often lost the rhythm and did not try to regain it. He seemed to want to get away from the music and to escape somewhere into space.

Just then a powerful blast shook the floor, the barrels and the bulb swinging from the dirty flex.

I started in surprise. Then came more dull heavy thuds, one after another.

At the first of them, the men almost simultaneously and with what seemed to be a habitual movement raised their mugs slightly from the barrel tops.

And that was all the notice they took of these noises. The accordionist went on playing, and the young man went on dancing.

"They're blasting down at the mine," said the man with the scar, smiling wryly at me. "Maybe you thought it was an air-raid?"

"I didn't think anything," I muttered, and told myself it was time to leave.

I had just about reached the door when it was flung wide open in my face. In the doorway stood a man in blue oil-stained overalls. Barring my exit, he stood watching the dance for a few moments and then announced in a loud voice:

"The taxi's waiting!"

He strode to the bar, where the barmaid had a mug of beer ready for him.

I went outside. Near the entrance stood a three-ton lorry, its sides down. The cab was empty and it looked as though the man in the blue overalls was the driver.

For some minutes I stood there watching the red blazing sun sailing calmly between the mountain tops.

I heard the door slam behind me and turned round.

Singly and in pairs people were tumbling out of the beer-house. They went to the lorry and began scrambling up into the back.

Some managed to do this unaided, others were helped up by their companions. Three were "loaded in bulk."

Finally the driver appeared, wiping the froth from his lips. He cast an indifferent and, I thought, slightly ironical look at the men.

I was at his side.

"Where are you taking them?" I asked.

"I'm on a special trip," he answered readily, apparently kidding me.

"And where are you taking them?"

"To the tunnel construction site where they belong."

"To the tunnel?"

"That's right. I drop them at the western sector."

The decision came to me suddenly. What was the sense of hanging around in the settlement till Monday?

I held the side of the lorry while the driver clamped it to. Then I said decisively:

"Listen, comrade, my name's Arefyev. I'm an engineer and have been appointed to work on the tunnel. What about giving me a lift?"

"Climb in, there's plenty of room," the driver said.

"The only thing is, I'll have to collect my suitcase at the hotel—about five hundred metres away."

"Get in with me," said the driver, pulling some rags from under the seat and wiping his hands on them.

He stopped outside the hotel, leaving the engine running.

I dashed in and picked up my suitcase. The receptionist sitting under the outstretched paws of the stuffed bear asked:

"Where are you going?"

"To the tunnel," I replied gaily. "Good-bye." I grasped the bear's paw and shook it.

In no time we were out of the settlement and driving along a dirt road which skirted the mountain. A railway line ran parallel to the road.

I looked intently ahead, hoping at every turn for a view that would be novel and exciting.

Vain hopes. The lorry kept heading left. And on the left-hand side as well as ahead of me I saw nothing but the mountain slope we were skirting, covered with sparse vegetation. On the right was the railway line, be-

yond it a chaos of scattered boulders and still farther off more mountains, each much the same as the next.

The monotony of the view did not depress me. I was wholly engrossed in thoughts of what lay in store for me. In a few minutes I would reach the place where I was to begin a new life, the life I had dreamed of when still at college.

It did not occur to me that to turn up without warning at one o'clock in the morning at an unfamiliar place was an unusual thing to do and without Falaleyev, who had been instructed by the managing director to take me there on Monday.

I was not thinking of the formal side of the matter at all. I had only one thing in mind: to get to the place as soon as possible, to find out about everything, to look at the gallery, to feel with my own hands the rock through which we had to cut the tunnel—in a word, to get down to work.

"Do you think the chief of the sector has gone to bed?" I asked the driver. "What's his name, by the way? The director told me but I've forgotten."

"Nikolai Nikolayevich? He won't turn in before I deliver this load. His name is Kramov."

"Load? What load?" I asked. "Oh, you mean the drunks? Say, you don't make a 'special trip' to the 'washer' just to collect them, do you? You must be pulling my leg."

"They're my orders," he said with a shrug of the shoulders.

"Who gives such orders?"

"Nikolai Nikolayevich. Who else would?"

"How strange. Do you mean to say he tells you to pick up the drunks? Why should he bother about them? By the way, the Minister told the managing director the other day that he ought to put a stop to the heavy drinking going on here."

"I don't know anything about the Minister. As for Nikolai Nikolayevich, it's not the drunks he's bothered about but the work." The driver spoke sharply and I realized that I had offended him.

But I had no intention of offending him or Kramov, the chief of the western section, the man with whom I—true, from the other side—was to storm the mountain. As for the Minister, I was sorry I had mentioned him at all.

"Well I can see Nikolai Nikolayevich is a popular fellow with you," I said lightly. "Has he been long in these parts?"

"He came to work on the construction job like you. It'll soon be a month since he's here."

"A good fellow?"

"The right sort!"

I envied this Kramov, wondering if I would be able to make out as well as he on the job, so that the people would say of me "the right sort!"

I was dying to hear more about Kramov from the driver. He needed no prompting and began to talk about his chief with obvious pleasure.

"There are chiefs," he said, "who don't look on you as a human being but as a sort of working unit. But he knows the way to men's hearts. And the people we have out here are tough. Heaven only knows where they hide their hearts. But Nikolai Nikolayevich has got there."

I waited impatiently for him to go on, for I love to read or hear stories about strong people of great experience who know how to win the hearts of their fellow men. At one time my favourite hero was Commissar Klichkov in Furmanov's *The Revolt* and I knew almost by heart the passage in which the commissar faces a riotous crowd.

Often when reading *The Revolt* or other books with strong characters I would pause for a while and think:

“Put yourself in Klichkov’s place and act. What would you do? Would you find the right things to say?”

In books about the last war I was most fond of passages about an officer or commissar arriving in a new unit on a hard-pressed sector of the front.

The soldiers don’t know the newcomer; perhaps in their hearts they haven’t confidence in him because to these battle-hardened veterans he is an unknown quantity.

And then he does something brave and finds the exact words to establish his authority and, more than that, to win him the love of his men.

Passages like that I found particularly gripping in my school days.

Now, too, I was naturally eager to learn more about the man with whom I was going to work and who, according to the driver, knew “the way to men’s hearts.”

The driver continued:

“Now take the question of the ‘washer.’ He sent for me one Saturday—three weeks ago it was—and said, ‘Drive to the settlement. D’you know the “washer”?’ I laughed and asked, ‘Is there anybody who doesn’t know that place?’ ‘A lot of our fellows go there, they tell me. And loaded up with liquor they must find it pretty hard walking eight kilometres home. Drive there at about midnight, drop in at the “washer,” pick them up and bring them back here. Is that clear?’ ‘Of course it’s clear,’ I said and thought to myself—a fine job this is, bringing drunks home.

“I drove off, and stopped outside the ‘washer.’ Some time after midnight the first of our fellows staggered out. Not so bad, he could keep on his feet, just had to hold on to the wall a little. Up here in the North that’s what we call ‘cold sober.’ He saw me and said, ‘Hey, Vasya, pal, give me a lift!’ ‘Get in,’ I said. ‘I’ve been sent here for the likes of you. Get in the back, your honour.’ So I took them all home. Now they know that they’ve

only to come out of the beer-house and get into the lorry. This is my third trip. D'you get the idea?"

I had to admit that I didn't see the point of Kramov's idea or what it had to do with his knowing the way to men's hearts. Sending a lorry for a bunch of carousers?

"Oh, no, there's far more to it," said the driver when I told him what I thought. "Leave our lads at the settlement over the week-end and then see whether they turn up on the job Monday morning. That'd mean more absenteeism and less work done. Whereas now I just make one trip, at the cost of less than five litres of petrol, and the men are on the job. And those who want their fun have it without the work suffering, see?"

At last the construction site at the foot of the hill came into view. On the steps of a small log house sat a man smoking a pipe. On catching sight of the approaching lorry he rose to his feet. The driver sounded the horn and the man waved in response. The lorry pulled up.

2

"Here we are," said the driver shutting off the gas and pulling at the hand-brake.

He glanced through the window behind him to satisfy himself that all was in order in the back of the lorry, and jumped out of the cab to meet the man with the pipe, who was slowly walking towards us. The man was wearing high-boots and breeches of a military cut, and a leather jacket was flung over his shoulders. He looked about forty.

Through the open window of the cab I caught the driver's words.

"Brought every one of them, Nikolai Nikolayevich," he said. "Everything's shipshape."

Then glancing in my direction and dropping his voice, which even so was loud enough for me to hear it, he said:

“Somebody for you!”

He did not say I was an engineer; evidently I did not look sufficiently imposing. Feeling a little awkward I alighted and walked over to Kramov.

I liked Kramov right from the outset; I liked his frank face, with the fair thinning hair above it, and I especially liked his eyes, which looked kind and were as blue as the sea in children's picture-books. Even the blue of his shirt paled in comparison.

Leisurely, with a slightly rolling gait, Kramov walked towards me. On his face was a broad, cordial smile.

All my awkwardness slipped away. Holding out my hand I said:

“Engineer Arefyev. I've been appointed to the eastern sector. I couldn't wait around in the settlement till Monday so I've come to you. Excuse me for arriving at such a late hour.”

Kramov clasped my hand firmly.

“It's never late here,” he replied with that same cordial smile. “The sun doesn't turn in, neither do we. We'll have a chat as soon as these scoundrels get down.”

By now the driver had let down the side of the lorry. I looked around and had the feeling that only a short while before the construction site had been abuzz with activity.

Telephone wires stretched along a line of fresh-cut poles. Their ends did not reach the house and dangled in the air. Near the foot of the mountain was the black gaping entrance of the tunnel, from which a narrow-gauge track ran. The rails had not yet been laid the whole way and broke off at the edge of the site. Nearby, next to a pile of sleepers, some spades and crowbars stood upright in the earth on the embankment.

To the right of the tunnel entrance I caught sight of a one-storey wooden building that looked like a barracks.

Meanwhile the men were tumbling out of the back of the lorry. Kramov, his pipe in his mouth, leant against a telegraph pole and attentively watched the operation.

I was surprised to find how the effects of the liquor had worn off during the journey. Even those who had been "loaded in bulk" climbed out without help.

There must have been twelve to fifteen men in the lorry. All of them greeted Kramov as they passed. Some looked sheepish and guilty. Others called out in loud, brazen tones, "Hail the North!" And each made a low mock bow.

Kramov remained where he was, with the unlighted pipe still in his mouth, nodding to some, saying good-humouredly to others, "Get on with you, arctic heroes."

When the last man had disappeared into the barracks, Kramov said to the driver:

"Put the lorry away, Vasily. Try and build communism with fellows like that," he said. "We'll be in luck if we get the tunnel built. Well, and when did you arrive?"

The question somehow sounded very natural and friendly.

I hastened to reply. As we talked we walked up to the little house. On the porch Kramov motioned me to pass in front of him. I went up the steps. A small, narrow entrance hall led into a room which struck me as cosy and lived in. By the window stood a simple but solidly built table, unvarnished and smelling of fresh logs, with equally plain chairs around it. On the table I noticed a pipe-rack; the pipes gleamed with dark varnish.

Beside a large looking-glass hung a chart of the mountain in vertical section, and a neatly drawn graph on squared paper.

Against the wall stood a bed with a red coverlet on it. Over the bed hung some photographs—I could not make them out from where I stood—and a fishing-rod in a canvas case. The floor was freshly scrubbed.

“Now we can chat,” Kramov said gaily. “Sit down on the bed, on a chair, where you please. Make yourself at home and tell me about yourself.”

Kramov dropped down on to the bed, stretched out his legs, drew a tobacco-pouch from his pocket and lit his pipe. He held the bowl in his fist, stroking it with his thumb. I sat down on the bed beside him and at once felt at peace with the world. It was like reaching a safe haven after travelling along an unknown road and worrying about what lay ahead.

I told Kramov a good deal about myself.

“I see, so you’ve graduated from the Moscow Transport Institute,” he said when I had finished. “I was a student there once myself. Well, and how do you come to be here? By appointment?”

The fact that Kramov and I had been at the same Institute put us on a still friendlier footing. I replied that I had volunteered to work in the Arctic because I had always thought work in tough and trying conditions most interesting and stimulating.

I was on the point of adding and “romantic” when I checked myself, fearing that it would sound childish. Slapping me on the knee Kramov said:

“You did well to come here, Andrei. There are some who like to be right behind the lines and others right in front!”

I was pleased that he had called me simply Andrei; it was quite natural considering the difference in our ages.

Kramov smiled—evidently recalling something from the past—and said:

“Now, I suppose, you want me to tell you about the mountain?” He took a deep puff. “The mountain is ca-

precious and ill-tempered. The rock's iolite. Every ten metres you have to shore it up, or it will cave in: the rock's full of faults. I discovered all that when we started digging the tunnel."

"Wait a minute, Nikolai Nikolayevich," I interrupted. "Surely there was a preliminary geological survey?"

"You and I were taught that there should have been one," said Kramov with a slightly ironical smile, and it seemed to me that he had added "and I" out of sheer politeness, "but the mountain is high and the tunnel is deep and they couldn't do a geological survey by drilling bore-holes or sinking a shaft. That would have taken too long and the tunnel had to be dug as soon as possible. And so the decision we took was to drive a prospecting gallery, using it at the same time as the main gallery of the tunnel. That was how I got the driving going."

I was not convinced.

"How is that? It meant practically working blindly."

"Not quite." Kramov drew on his pipe again. "In the first place preliminary surveying was done. Secondly, most of the mountains in these parts are approximately of the same rock composition. A mine's been dug in one of them. So we did have some data to go by. We're not working blindly."

I showered Kramov with questions of a technical nature. What was the cross-section of his gallery? Was the rock basically dry? Could a supplementary front of work be opened up by means of a shaft? What rate of driving had he reached? Could picks be used or only explosive charges?

Kramov's replies were clear, concise and to the point. The gallery was seven and a half square metres in section. The rock was mainly dry, but there were grounds for thinking that a damp zone might lie ahead. The great depth of the tunnel precluded the possibility of opening

up a supplementary front of work. The hardness of the rock virtually ruled out the use of picks, and explosive charges provided the principal method of extraction. So far the rate of tunnelling had not been great—twenty metres a week, as against a set target of thirty-four.

Kramov's businesslike replies made me feel that he sincerely wanted to give me the whole picture. I couldn't help feeling that some of my questions and doubts must strike him as naïve, typical of someone fresh from college, whose only direct contact with industry was during his student practice. But Kramov did nothing to make me conscious either of his superiority or my lack of experience, but talked to me as to an equal. For this I was grateful to him.

Our talk was cut short by the entrance of Vasily, the driver, who brought in a wooden trestle-bed and a mattress.

"Well, Andrei," said Kramov rising to his feet, "it's about three by now."

I went over to the window. I hadn't the least desire to sleep. The sun was still shining brightly. The horizon above the mountains was as delicately pink as a baby's skin. Again I felt the urge to act, and to act immediately.

I was all the more convinced that I had a tough job ahead of me, but that only spurred me on. Had I not known that work in my sector was only just beginning and that I was not likely to find anybody on the job yet I would have set off there on foot.

"Nikolai Nikolayevich," I said to Kramov, who was laying a sheet for me on the trestle-bed, "I'm half afraid to ask, it's so late, but maybe we could take a look at the gallery."

Kramov smiled broadly.)

"Exactly what I've been waiting for you to say. I wouldn't expect a tunnelling engineer to go to sleep without taking a glance at the gallery. All right, let's

be off. Only I'm warning you, you won't see any work; today's Sunday.

"But I only want to have a look round. And to see what the rock's like."

"All right, let's go."

We walked over to the barracks, where Kramov got overalls and rubber boots for me.

"D'you want a helmet?" he asked, and handed me a fibre helmet. He was wearing his breeches and leather jacket and merely slipped on a pair of rubber boots.

"No," I replied.

When we got into the tunnel I was so excited that my heart seemed to stop beating. Kramov walked in front, squelching through pools of water and lighting the way with a safety-lamp.

The gallery was about one and a half times the height of a man. At the beginning thick timber props supported the rock, and the roof and walls were lined with planks. Along the ground at the foot of the walls ran electric cables and tubes through which compressed air was fed to the pneumatic drills. From the damp roof hung bits of decayed timber and bark, dripping with water.

After about three metres the timber props ended. The projecting rock seemed to be covered with moss. I touched it and felt on my fingers the rock powder that had settled during drilling. Then I picked up a few fragments of rock and put them in my overall pocket for a later inspection by daylight.

We took a few more paces. The light of the torch picked out the rails, the projecting rock, the puddles on the floor and a few springs spurting from the walls. The water, which had passed through many natural filters, was remarkably clear.

We came to the end of the passage and reached the face. Here lay a big heap of loose rock.

“Well—there’s our gallery for you,” said Kramov, putting the lamp down. “We started the tunnelling ten days ago. We’ve been clearing the rock by hand because we haven’t got the rails finished yet and anyway the electric locomotive we’ve been promised isn’t due for another two or three days. On Monday we begin assembling the charging station. Is everything clear?”

No, a good many things were not clear. I wanted to know how they used the pneumatic drills and whether it was difficult to drill with them, how they had the mine-surveying service organized, and how many drillers worked on each shift.

It was about four o’clock when we left the gallery. I drew from my pocket the pieces of rock I had picked up and examined them. Yes, this was iolite, grey, with bluish splinters and shiny black flecks—one of the very hard rocks.

We went back to Kramov’s room.

“Now you must sleep, positively and absolutely,” said Kramov, flinging off his leather jacket.

Misgivings, hopes and doubts assailed me. What was the state of things on my sector? How could I catch up with Kramov, who had been tunnelling for well over a week? How would matters of labour and equipment be sorted out?

“I don’t feel a bit sleepy, Nikolai Nikolayevich,” I said. “Here under the midnight sun you can’t help thinking that man is made to act and not to sleep. Of course from the medical point of view that may be bad.”

“From the medical point of view a good many things are bad,” said Kramov with a laugh. He sat down on the bed and began to remove his boots. “To go without sleep is bad. Too much excitement is also bad. Smoking is bad, specially a pipe, which may cause cancer of the lip. But for this once let’s obey the doctors and drop off.”

I undressed and lay down. Kramov walked over to the window in his stockinged feet and loosened a cord that was attached to a black leatherette blind. The blind dropped with a bang and the room was in darkness.

I woke up, got out of bed and lifted the edge of the blind. Kramov's bed was empty.

Outside it was still very light. Was it night, day, early morning? I had lost all sense of time and was utterly confused.

On the table by the pipe-rack lay a note. I read it:

"Didn't want to wake you up. Must go up to the settlement for a short time. As soon as I get back we'll get things sorted out for you. Kramov."

While I was washing at a wash-stand in the hall there was a knock on the front door. A short thin fellow stood on the porch carrying a deep metal plate with another one over it. On top lay two slices of rye bread and a spoon.

"Good morning," he said. "Washing? I saw you lift up the blind. I've brought your breakfast."

"Thanks," I said. "But have you no canteen here?"

"No, we haven't as yet."

"Then where do you bring the food from?"

"It's brought in a lorry once a day from the works canteen. Enjoy your breakfast."

And off he went.

I ate some half-cold wheat porridge with a slice of meat, thinking how inconvenient it was to have to bring up the meals from the settlement. What did they bring them in? In thermos flasks? There probably wouldn't be a canteen on my sector either. I'd have to think of something.

After breakfast I went out to the construction site. The place looked deserted. From the barracks came the strains of an accordion, and on the barracks steps I

noticed a man, polishing his boots, spitting on them now and again.

There was definitely nothing to do but wait. I went back into the room and took a look at the photographs over Kramov's bed.

In one of them Kramov was in uniform with a major's star on his shoulder. He was sitting on a tree-stump at the edge of a wood, one hand on his hip, the other on his knee.

The next photograph showed a group of officers in the same surroundings. In the foreground was Kramov receiving something—probably a medal—from the hands of a general.

The third photograph was of a stout, bald-headed man. The whole of the left corner was taken up by a sprawling inscription. I read: "To Nikolai Nikolayevich from—" The signature was illegible, a fine flourish of the pen resting right on the nose of the bald-headed fellow.

Just then I happened to catch a glimpse of myself in the looking-glass which hung next to the photographs. What a pup I looked in comparison with Kramov.

At that moment I hated my looks. The looking-glass hung in a corner and backing away from it I got a full view of myself: a lanky fellow with a pink face and full lips. I tried to compress my lips and knit my brows. But that only made me look odd and unnatural.

I decided to shave only once a week to make myself look a little more manly.

Presently Kramov returned.

"Had your breakfast?" he asked with a beaming friendliness that livened up the whole room.

"Thanks, everything's fine," I replied. "There's only one thing I should like you to do for me and that is help me get to my sector."

"There is nothing you can do on your sector today," said Kramov. "I've only just seen Falaleyev and ar-

ranged with him that I'll send you over tomorrow. He'll drive over too. At nine. You'll spend today with me."

"But, Nikolai Nikolayevich—"

"You don't like my company?" he teased, raising his eyebrows and opening his blue eyes wide.

"Please, don't think that!" I replied hotly. The thought that he might have taken offence quite alarmed me. "You've been so kind and everything's so nice here. It's just that I feel restless."

"Why?" He took his pipe out of his pocket and stuck it in his mouth.

"I keep wondering how I'm going to catch up with you."

"Don't worry, you'll catch up, all right," Kramov was in earnest now. "In any difficulty and at any time you can count on me. And now we're going to a party."

"To what?"

"To a party," Kramov repeated. "One of my drillers is celebrating his birthday. There is no point in refusing. We won't stay long, just long enough to wish him many happy returns."

There was a convincing and final ring in whatever Kramov said; I had felt that the day before. It was in his answers to my questions, in his telling me that there was no sense in my going to my sector that day. And now his invitation to the party sounded equally convincing and natural.

We walked to the barracks. There we found about ten men gathered in a little room partitioned off from the rest of the building with plywood boarding. Many of the men were sitting cross-legged on the floor, others had made themselves comfortable on the plank bunks. A mattress set up on wooden legs and bare of bedding had been moved out of the way to the wall.

My friend from the "washer," the young man in the canvas jacket, was playing an accordion. The man with

the bushy moustache who had stood opposite me at the barrel was now sitting in the middle of the company pouring out vodka into jam jars. He, I guessed, was the host.

As we went in the music ceased. The host rose.

"Many happy returns of the day, Konstantin Fyodorovich," said Kramov, extending his hand in a broad sweeping gesture. Then, suddenly dropping it, he frowned and glanced round.

"Why are you sitting on the floor, comrades," he asked loudly. "It's not for Russians to sit like Turks. Aren't there any chairs to be got?"

The company smiled. Someone laughed loudly. The host said with a sigh:

"No furniture shops in these parts. That's what it is, Nikolai Nikolayevich."

Kramov's face darkened. His brows met sharply on the bridge of his nose, the eyes seemed to change colour, the blue turning to grey. He snatched the pipe out of his mouth and bit his lip. Turning to the young man in the canvas jacket he said:

"Run along and get the supplies manager."

The young man put down the accordion and went out. A minute or two later he was back with the same little man who had brought me my breakfast. The host offered him a jar of vodka. But Kramov intercepted it.

"Now listen to me, Fedunov," he said slowly. "People here, as you can see, have gathered to have a good time, they're drinking and they want to treat you. But you're not going to drink with them. You haven't the right to. Why," Kramov's voice rose sharply, "why, I ask you, do the best driller in the sector and his guests have to sit on the floor?"

Fedunov's face broke out in tiny beads of perspiration.

He replied in broken tones, half in self-justification, half in jest:

"There have been no deliveries of furniture, you know that, Nikolai Nikolayevich. We haven't even sent out any orders. The office is taking its time over them. We'll have, so to say, to be patient."

"We won't be patient," cried Kramov. "No one on the western sector ought to sit on chairs or stools when the best workmen on the job are sitting on packing-cases or on the floor!"

He paused.

The host, Konstantin Fyodorovich, seemed upset, as though it were all his fault. The young man in the canvas jacket stood leaning against the wall, his hands in his pockets and his left eye screwed up as if to say, "Well, let's see how this'll finish up." Others looked at Nikolai Nikolayevich with approval, nodding their heads after every few words he said, while some averted their eyes as though sorry for Fedunov and ashamed to meet his gaze. To tell the truth, I was sorry for Fedunov myself.

"Go at once to the office," Kramov said finally, "and collect the chairs from the engineer's room, from the technician's, from your own and from mine, and bring them here. And let those who have no concern for the workers' needs sit on the floor themselves.

Fedunov rushed out. He returned soon with three chairs. He put them down, stroked their seats for some unknown reason, and dashed out again.

"That's that," Kramov said heartily and loudly. "Now, friends, you can sit and enjoy yourselves in proper fashion. My best wishes to you, Konstantin Fyodorovich."

He clasped the host's right wrist with his left hand and struck the palm with his own right hand.

The company felt relief now that the tension had eased. Chairs were moved around with two sitting on each. Jars clinked and everyone began to talk at once.

The young man picked up his accordion.

"Say," cried Kramov suddenly, "why is this fellow playing today? Where's Timokhin, your best accordionist?"

"Timokhin's ill," said the man with the scar. "Been laid up since yesterday."

"What's the matter with him? Caught cold?" asked Kramov.

"Caught cold my eye," replied the young man. "Just had a drop too much at the 'washer' yesterday. Maybe it was the sausage he ate. The sausage isn't too good at the 'washer.' "

Everybody laughed.

"Well, comrades, have a good time," said Kramov. "I'll go and see the patient. Come on, Andrei. Good-bye, friends."

"What about a drink, Nikolai Nikolayevich? Just a quarter of a jarful," the host called after us.

"I don't drink, lads, you know that," said Kramov from the doorway.

Outside we ran into Fedunov. He was carrying several chairs, panting under the weight of his uncomfortable load.

Kramov did not even look at him.

We went into the main room of the barracks.

It was a big gloomy place with two tiers of bunks running along the walls.

The sick man lay in his clothes on a bunk, his head flung back. His hands were pressed against his stomach and he was groaning loudly.

"How are you feeling, Timokhin?" Kramov asked as he reached his bunk.

The sick man made no reply but continued groaning.

"He's got cramps. Some drops are what he needs. But we've no medicines here," said a voice in the gloom from one of the bunks.

The door banged and Fedunov hurried in mopping his brow with a dirty handkerchief as he came.

"Has the doctor seen him?" asked Kramov, without turning to look at Fedunov.

"Not yet, Nikolai Nikolayevich, but we've sent a note with the food lorry this morning."

"And what have you been feeding to the sick fellow?"

"You know we've only got what the delivery lorry brings," Fedunov stuttered in a low voice.

"A disgrace I call it," hissed Kramov. Then he dug into his pocket, took out some money and handed Fedunov a hundred-ruble note.

"Bear in mind, Andrei," he said, "there is nothing so base as callous treatment of people. The people up here are particularly sensitive. They need a special approach." He turned to Fedunov. "Here, take this and go and buy a chicken in the settlement."

Kramov frowned and fell silent. I could read his thoughts. He was thinking of the hard conditions of life and work for the people in the North and how important it was to improve these conditions.

"You've got to know how to approach the people here," Kramov continued, lighting up his pipe. "If you can get on proper terms with them, they'll tunnel all the way from the North to the South Pole, let alone through the mountain."

I listened eagerly. A few moments before I had been wanting to ask him why the people in these parts drank so much. Why they were so irresistibly drawn to that gloomy, damp, foul-smelling "washer," why conditions in the barracks were so unsatisfactory.

But now it seemed to me tactless to put these questions to one who took the needs of his fellow men so

much to heart, and who felt and understood them so well.

After all, these were the first few hard weeks on a new construction site in a remote spot in the Arctic. Naturally there was much that remained to be organized and put into shape.

I asked Kramov whether the Party organization at the works was large and how many members of the Party there were at his sector. As I asked him this I told myself that I must lose no time in getting my own name on the Party register.

"We're cut off from the works' Party organization," he said. "It's eight kilometres from here to the works and in winter you'd think it was fifty. I've only one Party member at the sector and that's myself. Are you a member of the Party?"

"I'm a candidate member."

"Well, drop in to see Sizov at the works and register."

On the porch of Kramov's house I caught sight of a stout man of medium height. He looked about fifty; his puffy and unhealthily pale face was covered with a network of red veins.

"Did you send for me?" the man asked Kramov.

"Yes, Comrade Khomyakov. I've been expecting you since yesterday. Step in."

Realizing that the two men were going to talk business, and not wishing to be in the way, I said:

"I'll go for a stroll, Nikolai Nikolayevich."

Kramov raised no objections. He followed Khomyakov into the house and I walked along the edge of the site towards the mountain, turning over in my mind all I had seen and heard that day.

The figure of Kramov appeared before me in full stature. I saw him in uniform as he looked in the photograph over his bed. And I saw him among soldiers, a

commander on whose every word the men hung, their eyes never leaving his face; thus he had led his men into attack.... I did not know what exploit had won him the decoration he had received from the hands of the general but I was certain it was something really heroic.

"That's what a friend, an older comrade, a teacher, ought to be like," I said to myself. "The sort you'd want to copy, someone you'd do things for."

On my return my meditations were interrupted by the sound of Kramov's voice coming through the open window.

"You've as much backbone as a rag!" Kramov was saying loudly. "No wonder you lost your job at the Karamsky tunnel. Don't offer excuses. Just let that happen again and we'll have a different kind of a talk. Is that clear?"

I stopped. It would not do to go in at that point.

A voice, low and timorous, replied:

"It won't happen again, Nikolai Nikolayevich, I give you my word."

"I can't trust you," Kramov broke in. "You've no backbone. And let me tell you, that tunnel is your last chance."

To avoid running into Khomyakov, I slipped round the corner of the house. Only after I heard the front door slam did I go in.

Kramov was pacing the room, puffing away at his pipe, his hands in his pockets.

He looked hard at me and must have guessed, perhaps from my eyes, that I had heard part of his conversation with Khomyakov.

"You must have heard our little chat," he said.

"Who is the man?"

"Khomyakov is a shift engineer. Human destiny is a strange thing. We're not fatalists; we've no use for mys-

tical concepts like fate. Yet there is something inevitable dogging the footsteps of man with a shady past."

"Do you mean Khomyakov?"

"Yes, I do." Kramov bent over the table and began to poke out the contents of his pipe into an ash-tray with a match. "Khomyakov was a big shot once, the chief of a construction job. He was careless about something and there was a fatal accident. He was tried and got a suspended sentence. The term finished long ago, yet he still feels the sentence hanging over him. Nothing good will ever come of him. There are things he can do but he's not up to any big job."

I could not agree.

"Surely there are cases, Nikolai Nikolayevich," I suggested hesitantly, "when a man, as you say, atones for his misdeeds, and finds the strength to make a fresh start?"

Kramov looked up, struck his palm with the bowl of his pipe and replied:

"We must do all we can to help these people. The strength of our society is so great, the influence of the community so effective—"

He stopped, losing the thread of his thoughts. Then, as though following up a phrase uttered to himself, he continued:

"All the same a man like that is very much like a cracked vase. You have to stand it up somewhere inconspicuous, not in full view, with the crack turned to the wall. But that merely means that a man with a crack in him must be treated with special consideration. He must be helped, persuaded to do things and now and then shaken up a bit, as I have done with Khomyakov, to make him do things and give him more confidence."

Kramov was right, I thought. I was just going to say something to that effect to him when we heard an insistent knocking on the door.

In came a lad of seventeen or eighteen, with unruly blond hair and a freckled face. He wore high leather boots, a Ukrainian shirt pulled in at the waist with a leather belt, and trousers that were too wide.

"Would you be the chief?" the lad asked Kramov. When he opened his mouth his snub nose crinkled and his whole face took on a perky, pugnacious expression.

"Would I be? I am," replied Kramov, winking at me gaily. "And who are you?"

"My name's Zaitsev," the lad answered hastily and as though it were of secondary importance.

"And what do you want, Zaitsev?"

"I want a job."

"And where have you blown in from?"

"I've come with my dad in answer to your ad for labour."

Zaitsev spoke abruptly, rapidly, as though convinced that neither Kramov's questions nor his own replies were of any consequence but only delayed a decision.

Pretending not to notice the lad's impatience, Kramov went on questioning him.

"And where does your father work?"

"In the mine. He's a driller. We're from the Urals." Zaitsev was speaking more slowly and less impatiently now, realizing that until Kramov had finished questioning him he would make no headway in his own affairs.

"How old are you?"

"Eighteen," the lad replied briskly and added, "soon will be."

"Belong to the Komsomol?"

"No, but I'm going to join."

"Why don't you go to the mine along with your father?"

"The tunnel's new. That's why I want to work there. I want to study too," he said stubbornly.

"Well, that's a good enough reason. But we're not a school, we're a construction site."

"I know. I'll work. Then you might start some courses. Or I'll learn to drive a lorry."

"I see," said Kramov with a nod. "Very well, Zaitsev, go to the shift engineer. Khomyakov's his name. He'll fix you up."

Zaitsev's nose twitched, he grinned and walked out without another word.

"People keep coming for jobs," Kramov said gaily. "I like to see new people," he added confidentially.

Evening came. As on the night before Kramov dropped the blind with a bang and shut out the eternal day from our room.

The thought that in a few hours' time I would certainly be on my sector filled me with excitement.

I lay wondering how I could thank Kramov for the cordial welcome and the advice he had given me, how to explain to him how happy I was to have met a man like him.

"Sleeping, Andrei?" Kramov asked suddenly.

"No, no," I replied quickly.

"Preparing for battle? How well I know that feeling."

I was overjoyed at the opening he had given me, hoping the talk would not break off.

"You fought in the war, of course, Nikolai Nikolayevich? I noticed these photographs. They must have been taken at the front?"

"Yes, the First Ukrainian Front," Kramov replied briefly.

"How I envy you! As for myself, I've been nowhere. I've not done anything worth while, I haven't really seen anything and you've built many tunnels."

"Not so very many. Four in all!"

"Four. That's no joke. And I've had three spells of practical training while at the Institute and that's all. I was still at school when you were at the front."

"What's bad about that?" Kramov laughed. "I'd gladly swap ages with you."

"My age!" I cried. "It's made me miss the first five-year plans, and the war. Remember that story by H. G. Wells? It's about a man who invented a Time Machine. He used to catch rays that had once shone on the earth and take them out of space. He showed past ages on a screen. If only it were possible!"

"What age do you want back?" asked Kramov. "The Stone Age? Ancient Rome?"

"Oh no! What do I want with ancient Rome! I want to see the October Revolution and the Civil War. I want to see how Magnitogorsk was built or the Amur tunnel cut. I'd like to see Lenin. As for old times, I wouldn't mind taking a look at the way underground passages were dug in Ivan the Terrible's time at the siege of Kazan. Interesting to see what kind of equipment they used then."

"You're a romantic, Andrei," Kramov chuckled in the dark. "Incidentally, I'm a romantic myself. Are your parents alive?" he asked after a brief pause.

"My father's dead. He died in forty-four. We lived in Siberia then. My mother's alive."

"Have you any friends? A girl friend maybe?"

"A girl friend?"

I said nothing. I could not speak on that subject. Yes, I had a girl friend. I loved her but had never been sure whether she loved me. Sometimes I thought she did, and then whatever she said—even things in which the word "love" didn't appear—seemed to speak of that love to me. But at other times it seemed to me that I had made a mistake and that she had no real love for me. And I would ask her insistently, "You don't really love me, do you?"

And she would answer: "It's not true. I do love you. I've always loved you." And she repeated the word "love" so many times that I was terrified and could register

only one word, like the sound made by a wood-pecker, "No— No— No!"

Incidentally, I'm just inventing all this now as I write these lines.

I did have a girl friend and we loved each other. Her name was Svetlana. We were fellow students taking the same courses. A year before we had decided that on graduating we would go and work together on the same construction site.

True, she had not promised to marry me. I do not want to hold against her something that she did not do.

But we loved each other, we certainly did. And we had made up our minds to work together. She was due to arrive in a few days. We had agreed that I should send her a telegram as soon as I got to Zapolyarsk. She had given me her word that she would come and I knew she would not go back on it.

Yet, strange to say, I did not mention Svetlana to Kramov that night. I can't explain why. Evidently it was something I wanted to keep to myself. Now and then you read in novels that when a person is happy he is eager to share his happiness with others. I don't know about that. He may be eager to have others rejoice with him but he is not likely to talk about the cause of his happiness. He wants to keep it to himself, to keep it his very own. The first time Svetlana kissed me I went about in a daze all day, looking at people and thinking: "You don't know, you have no idea what's happened to me today."

"No, Nikolai Nikolayevich," I said, "I haven't any girl friend."

"You're quite like Robinson Crusoe then," he said.

"Why?"

"You're starting a new life as a free man with no ties, no attachments, quite on your own. And now let's sleep."

A few minutes later I heard his even breathing.

But I haven't as yet made clear the purpose of the tunnel we were going to build.

In this part of the Arctic, far in the tundra, was a mine from which phosphorous ore—the raw material for fertilizers—was extracted.

The ore was transported along a branch railway line to a concentration plant and then shipped in concentrated form to various parts of the country.

The distance between the mine and the plant was about twenty-five kilometres. A railway line skirted the foot of the mountain that lay between them. But in winter, which here lasts the best part of eight months, snow-falls disrupted transportation. Besides, the maintenance workers on the railway line and their homes which were close to the foot of the mountain were in daily danger of being swept away by snow-slides. The track itself was frequently out of commission due to snowstorms and avalanches, and each time this happened great effort was required to get it in working order again.

During such periods the plant ran short of raw material. The railway trucks that came to pick up the concentrate stood idle. Many tons of ore piled up at the mine, lying exposed and getting covered with a thick layer of snow.

When the railway line was finally put into commission again it took many days before the dispatching pace was restored. And so it went on until the next heavy snow-fall or a fresh avalanche.

To put an end to this state of things it was decided to dig a tunnel through the mountain and link the mine directly with the plant. This would ensure continuous work and guarantee that the railway line was usable in all weathers. It was planned to open up a new mine on

the mountain. But that was still a thing of the future. Our immediate task was to bore the tunnel.

At seven the next morning Vasily dropped me at the foot of the eastern slope of the mountain, turned his lorry around and drove away.

I had arrived far ahead of time. My appointment with Falaleyev, the head of the construction department, was for nine o'clock. But I had begged Kramov to send me over the moment we awoke, soon after six that morning.

And so there I was standing at the foot of the mountain which I had seen from Kramov's sector. From here it looked to me even blacker and more forbidding.

Mountains pressed in on me on every side—a rugged world of rock. Even in the rays of the unsetting sun these bare mountains looked grim and uninviting, the pink glow lighting up their crests only emphasized their general gloominess.

The wind howled. It seemed that somewhere close by there was an inexhaustible source of winds. And they roared and whipped against my face from all sides.

I saw nothing or practically nothing that even remotely resembled a construction site. True, near the foot of the mountain stood a small log barracks with a tiny tumble-down hut beside it. And that was all. There wasn't a sign of any other buildings, no tracks, nothing to indicate that work had begun.

Suddenly my ear caught an even, metallic hacking sound, coming from somewhere behind the barracks.

I went round the barracks and saw a strange sight. Two workmen were sitting at the foot of the mountain and were hacking at the rock with crowbars.

Unnoticed, I watched for some time in puzzled silence as the crowbars struck at the hard rock. It would

not give way, and several blows were required to chip a small splinter from it.

"Tough work, men!" I shouted.

The two men dropped their crowbars and straightened up. One had a padded jacket on, the other wore overalls. Both looked to me to be getting on in years.

"And who may you be? A chief?" asked one of them.

"Well, yes, if you like," I replied.

"I see," said the second worker. "Hold that, comrade chief, will you?"

He held out his crowbar to me. I took it.

"Take mine, too," said the other.

Automatically I took his crowbar too.

"Well, friend Agafonov," said the man in overalls, "now we've turned in our tools, let's be off. Good-bye!"

They shook the dirt and rock-dust off their clothes. I stood there puzzled, the crowbars in my hand. Without so much as a glance at me the two men walked past.

"Wait a moment, comrades, wait!" I shouted, and flung down the wretched crowbars. "Where are you off to?"

They stopped reluctantly.

"We've no time to hang about, chief," called Agafonov, "we've a long walk ahead of us to the settlement."

"But who gave you permission to stop work?" I asked in complete desperation.

"It's not work we're stopping," Agafonov objected quietly. "That's not work, that's a mockery of work. It's a job we're not fit for. We're too old."

"Wait," I said, moving closer to them. "Tell me what's wrong. I'm in charge of this sector."

Not a trace of my confident manner was left. I felt more or less as I had in the "washer" and spoke not as a man in charge but more like a suppliant, a junior

to seniors, like a man who fears he will not be taken seriously.

"We're fed up with talk, comrade chief," said the man in overalls whose name, I found out later, was Nesterev. "It's true that we've not seen *you* before. But other chiefs who have come down have asked us, 'Chipping the rock?' 'We're chipping the damn rock!' 'Well, chip away, chip away!' And off they went. Now we're sick of it all. We've done our chipping and we've had enough of it."

Again he made a move towards the road.

My thoughts were in a whirl. One thing was clear: I had to prevent them from leaving and to do it at any cost. I had to show determination, to put my foot down. Oh, if only Kramov were in my place!

I pulled myself together and said firmly:

"Listen, comrades, I'm an engineer. I have just graduated. I've come here in the Arctic to work. To tell you the truth, I can't understand why you're working that way. It's a government decision that we dig a tunnel here. Yet I see no sign that any work's begun. Help me to figure things out."

I sat down on a moss-covered boulder, a chip that had broken away from the rock face.

The workmen shifted from one foot to the other, then came nearer and dropped down beside me. I heaved a sigh of relief.

"Tell him, Kuzma," Agafonov said wearily.

"Well, the matter's clear enough," Nesterev began gloomily. "We were working at the mine. There was plenty of work there and we made good money, as much as three thousand a month on the drill. Then they told us, 'We're going to dig a tunnel so that the ore can be transported without delays. Piecework by the metre of tunnelling.' We agreed to go. When we got here they told us, 'Start working.' 'What with?' we

asked. 'With crowbars, for a start. Tomorrow the tools will be coming and there'll be someone from the management.' They've been putting us off like that from day to day for the last ten days. Not even a day's quota to our credit. Now figure that out, chief...."

Both stared at a spot on the ground. But they didn't leave. And I realized that despite all their weariness and indignation they were curious to know what answer their new chief might give.

I said nothing—I did not know what to say. That the tools would arrive in a day or two? They'd shrug and say that the new chief was singing the same old tune. Besides, I was furious myself about what I had heard and I could hardly restrain myself from cursing the management. I longed to say to them, "Drop work and let's go together to the works and compel them to take action. Until they provide us with a minimum of equipment and skilled labour there is no sense in going on with the work and I, Arefyev, am not taking on the sector."

But something prevented me from uttering the words that were on the tip of my tongue.

That would have been the easiest way—to get panicky and raise a row at the works. But it would have been cowardice, sheer cowardice. That wasn't the way the people I'd read about in books, people I admired, acted in difficult circumstances. Kramov wouldn't have acted that way.

For some time we sat in silence, avoiding one another's eyes.

"I'll tell you what, comrades," I said at last, trying to speak as firmly as possible, "I'm not going to plead with you to stay. You're grown-up men and I'm no youngster. All I wish to say is this: that a tunnel is to be dug through the mountain is a settled matter. They've already started driving a gallery in the western sector.

The managing director assured me the equipment will start arriving here next week. And as a matter of fact we won't need it before then. As far as I know the compressor hasn't been installed yet, so we won't have the air to feed the pneumatic drills anyway. To cut things short, I'll be taking the necessary measures. Meanwhile, I'm cancelling the order to work with crowbars on the face."

The workmen were still looking at the ground. It seemed to me that they had not been listening properly and that my words had made no impression on them. My nerve broke and I burst out:

"Don't let me down!"

Agafonov raised his head slowly and glanced up at me:

"Will you tell all that to the men higher up?"

"Or get it in the newspaper," Nesterev supported him sullenly. "There'll be hell to pay. You don't get patted on the back for things like that."

They said nothing else. But I was certain now they would stay.

Agafonov confirmed my thoughts.

"Very well, engineer, we'll stay. We won't leave you in the tundra, we don't do that in the North. But if the tools aren't here next week, we go, you have our word for it. We'll go, won't we, Kuzma?"

"We will," said Nesterev.

"I promise, promise with all my heart!" I blurted out, ready to hug them.

At that moment an automobile horn sounded. A little tarpaulin-covered jeep had pulled up on the road. A stout, short man clambered slowly out of it. The driver had obviously blown his horn to attract our attention.

"There's the chief cook and bottle-washer with his pockets full of promises," said Agafonov angrily.

I advanced towards the newcomer.

"Morning, I'm Falaleyev," the man growled, shoving his hand at me. Before I realized that this gesture was intended for a handshake he had already dropped his hand. He took no notice of the fact that I had not responded to the gesture, just thrust out his hand, dropped it, and that was all.

"Well, did you get settled?" he asked quickly. "I bet you're sorry to be up in this God-forsaken hole?"

The man was getting my blood up. It was he who had called me a pup over the telephone at the works. It was he who had put the workmen on this fool's job. And now he had shoved his hand at me as though I were a log of wood.

I tried to restrain my anger as I demanded:

"Tell me, please, was it you who ordered the men to start the work with crowbars?"

He gave me a quick glance.

"And what if it was?"

"Then kindly explain why you did it."

"Eh, you're as green as they make 'em," he told me, laughing. "All right, I'll tell you why I did it. That's not hard to do. The fellows who took the jobs here came to work, didn't they? They had to be given something to do, hadn't they? The machinery and tools hadn't arrived yet, had they? Clear?"

"No," I said.

"What's not clear about that?" Falaleyev shrugged. "The fellows had to be given something to do."

"But don't you think it would have been more sensible to get the workmen down here after the equipment had arrived, not before?" I interrupted him.

"Eh, comrade engineer," said Falaleyev with unconcealed irony. "Things here don't run on schedule like that. This isn't the Moscow Metro, you know. Tell me this: Would it have been better if the equipment had arrived before we had the labour? You should thank

your lucky stars that you've got the labour. Let the men work until the tools come, even if all they do is move stones from one place to another."

"That's a disgraceful attitude to take," I remarked quietly.

"What?" Falaleyev shrieked with a sudden change of tone. "You— You . . . milksop. I came to the North when there were only a few dozen people! I—"

Something snapped in me and I lost all control of myself.

"Stop!" I shouted. "You haven't a heart. For you people aren't people at all, they're just working units. You wanted to kill their enthusiasm for work, to make them hate the tunnel from the start. I'll go to the managing director, to the public prosecutor—"

Choking, I stopped short. Suddenly I felt ashamed of my outburst, as though hearing myself with the ears of another. I was certain that Falaleyev would turn on his heel, get into his car and drive away. But to my amazement he did nothing of the sort. He growled rather calmly:

"If you're going to start running to the prosecutor from the very first, when are you going to get any work done?"

His calm tone had a cooling effect on me. Trying to make amends for my rash outburst I said quickly:

"Judge for yourself, Comrade Falaleyev, surely to start the tunnelling with nothing but crowbars is absurd. Surely workmen should take pride in their work and what we're doing is like sending soldiers to fight against tanks with sticks."

"All right, don't air your propaganda on me," Falaleyev replied with rough good nature. "Did you think you were going to find everything ready for you when you arrived? You were offered a job at the mine, why didn't you take it? By the way, there's another engineer

coming to your sector. A skirt, so I don't envy you. Now let's go to the office and have a talk. Oh, by the way, there's a telegram for you."

Shoving the telegram into my hand, he strode off to the barracks.

The telegram was from Svetlana. Hard to believe, but I had completely forgotten about her. During that couple of hours I had been able to think of only one thing: how to keep the two workmen from leaving their jobs.

But now Falaleyev and everything around me went completely out of my mind. I tore open the telegram. It consisted of one word. "Coming."

Several days went by. During that period some changes had taken place on my sector. In the first place the number of workmen had increased. There were now ten men living in the barracks besides Agafonov and Nesterev. Among the newcomers were drillers, fusemen and assembly workers.

I moved into a little annex adjoining the office. Life was hard: as on the western sector, food was brought to us once a day and each of us warmed it up as best he could. We slept without bed linen on thin mattresses spread over plank beds. Bed linen had been promised, it was true, and was due to arrive any day. Water, too, was a problem: it had to be carried in buckets from a small lake about five hundred paces to the south. From three sides the lake was inaccessible because of big heaps of loose boulders. The water was ice-cold, and a chill wind blew across it. But the discomforts of life did not bother me much. There were even days when I did not shave, and I slept without removing my outer garments. Bigger worries pushed everything else aside.

The principal worry now was the installation of the compressor. We needed it to feed the pneumatic drills; the compressor had to breathe life into our machinery.

Here we were up against our first difficulty. The concrete foundation for the compressor had to rest on bed rock. But when we began digging a pit for the foundation we suddenly struck soft ground. We tried digging in another place, but with the same result. Besides, every pit we dug began to fill up with subsoil water and we had no means of pumping it out; the electric cable we would need before we could use a pump had not yet been extended to the mountain.

I remember how the workers stood around one of the pits, their gaze wandering from the water flooding it to me, the engineer. Of course, they expected me to issue orders, to give advice and instructions. But I said nothing. I could not understand what was wrong. The mountains all around us were hard rock. But here at the foot of them, in the hollows, lay soft, crumbling ground in which it was impossible to sink a foundation for a vibrating compressor weighing many tons.

That was the first blow.

I spent all evening and half the night poring over the books I had brought with me, but failed to find anything that would help. Compressor installations were outside my field, yet they were closely connected with tunnel construction. I tried to console myself with the thought that I was not a compressor expert, but it did not help.

I would have to go to the works, explain the situation, and seek technical assistance. I felt bitter shame at the thought; I could visualize the mocking smile on Falaleyev's face when I appeared. But there was no other way out.

I sat on a boulder and waited for the lorry that brought our food to come and give me a lift to the works.

The lorry arrived at two o'clock. When it was still some distance off I noticed that there was a man sitting next to the driver. Someone from the works, I thought to myself. That was all we needed—for this man from the works to see our pits flooded with water. The lorry pulled up at the roadside, and out of it stepped Kramov.

I was so delighted to see him that all my troubles seemed to slip away. I ran towards him. He was approaching with long strides, stepping over the rocks that lay in his way. He wore the same leather jacket and top-boots and there was the inevitable pipe in his mouth.

"Hullo, Andrei, how are things?" he called to me.

I shook his hand heartily and at once felt that I could quite easily and unashamedly lay my problems before him.

"Thought I'd see how you were getting along," he said with a broad smile, and sat down on a boulder. I sat beside him. "Well, started the driving yet?"

I smiled bitterly. He was asking whether we had started the driving when we couldn't even install the compressor.

"No, Nikolai Nikolayevich. We still have a long way to go before we can start tunnelling," I replied frankly.

I began pouring out all my troubles, hiding nothing and as I spoke Kramov cleaned the stem of his pipe with a blade of grass.

"And how did you manage the installation of the compressor, did you have any trouble?" I asked, when I had finished.

"None whatever," replied Kramov.

"What was your subsoil like?"

"The same as yours, I presume."

"Then I must be an utter fool."

"That's putting it a little too strongly," Kramov laughed, and rose. "Come and show me what you've been doing."

He strode towards the mountain, his hands in the pockets of his worn leather jacket.

I trudged after him.

The workmen were sitting in a dejected group round the pit, spitting into the rising water.

Seeing Kramov approach the men slowly scrambled to their feet. I noticed this at once and was surprised.

"Afternoon, boys," Kramov greeted them crisply. He walked over to the edge of the pit and looked at the water.

One of the men burst into high-pitched laughter. Kramov looked sharply at him and the laughing ceased.

"All right, let's go to the office," said Kramov.

I led him into my little cubby-hole.

"You know what I'm going to tell you, old boy," said Kramov, dropping on to the bunk. "There are no difficulties. You've merely imagined them."

"What do you mean?" I cried.

"Just that. Have you ever thought, lad, how these mountains were formed? They are the remnants of the glacial period, and quite recent ones. Perhaps two hundred and fifty thousand years ago a glacier moved down here. That means your subsoil is moraine, ordinary debris deposited by glaciers."

"That's all very well," I began, but Kramov interrupted.

"And that being so there must be hard rock under the moraine. The same rock that the mountains are made of. What you have to do is to dig through to the rock."

"But what about the water?" I asked. "There is no way of connecting a pump here."

"Use buckets, comrade engineer, buckets and a windlass. You'll soon strike the hard rock, I'm certain of it."

I kept silent. What Kramov had said was clear, simple and beyond all doubt correct.

"It's a wonder all this never occurred to me," I said at last.

"It would not have occurred to me either eighteen years ago when I had just left the Institute. In those days a blue-print was to me like the Gospel to believers. Every word in it was as infallible as it is for you today."

"And for you?"

"I respect the blue-print and try to follow it. But when it requires the use of a nut or a bolt and you don't happen to have one, surely you are not going to hold up the work because of that. In such a case I use a couple of nails instead. That, roughly speaking, is the whole difference."

Kramov left late in the afternoon. A lorry came for him, which made me think with annoyance that the western sector was provided with transport facilities while we hadn't a single lorry.

Soon after my meeting with Kramov our equipment arrived: pneumatic drills with the compressed air tubes and two lorries for removing debris. Blasting charges were also sent.

Now we were all set to start tunnelling or, to put it in technical language, to drive a heading.

After much effort the compressor was got going.

I decided to begin work the next morning, but no one felt like sleeping that night. The arctic sun shone brightly overhead. Our group of workmen, which consisted of assemblymen, drillers, pump-hands and shot-firers, had crowded round the compressor. It was good to hear the transmission belts cleave the air. I stood

listening with the men to the hum of the compressor, sweeter than music to my ear.

Someone tapped me on the shoulder. It was Nesterev.

"There's somebody asking for you," Nesterev said. "Over there by the office."

It was Svetlana. I did not recognize her at once in her dark-blue overalls and gay kerchief.

I hurried over to her.

4

I had thought it all out beforehand—I would move out of the little cubby-hole adjoining the office and let Svetlana have it. I could sleep in the barracks.

How happy I was that she had come! What more could a young fellow with a profession, longing for difficult, responsible work and getting it, what more could he ask for than that the girl he loved should follow him to share the hardships of his life and work? Was not that happiness?

While I was showing Svetlana her room and telling her hurriedly about everything that had happened on the sector during the past few days, our comrades were assembling at the foot of the mountain. It was time to start to drive the heading.

The drillers were there with their long pneumatic drills looking like wingless dragon-flies, from which the grey compressed-air tubes snaked away; there were the sappers with their heavy, tight-packed charges, in canvas bags over their shoulders, and the pump-hands.

I really don't know how to convey the peculiar atmosphere of those hours, the sense of anticipation and anxiety which gripped us all on that solemn occasion.

Svetlana adjusted herself to the new surroundings with astonishing speed. I had so hoped that the work-

men would receive her well, so that she would feel at home in these remote, rugged parts.

But there was no reason for any misgivings. Svetlana at once fell into the swing of things, ran from the compressor to the drillers, examined the tubes, made sure they were lying flat, then ran back to me and whispered:

"You ought to make a speech, Andrei."

She cut a very pretty picture just then. In her overalls, which clung tightly to her boyish figure and were already powdered with rock-dust, and wearing a red kerchief from under which a stray curl or two showed she looked at me with great big eyes twinkling with excitement. Her olive-skinned face had a light sprinkling of drilling dust.

I was not much good at speech-making. I would rarely take the floor at Institute or Komsomol meetings and if I did I would only say a few words from my seat.

But now something urged me on and I jumped on a boulder and cried, "Comrades!" And then I was stuck. I felt so nervous that my knees began to shake.

From the top of the boulder I stared at the men and they stared back at me. Then I glanced at my watch and said in a scarcely audible voice:

"It's ten minutes after midnight. Let's go, comrades!"

Svetlana gave the order for the compressor to be switched on.

The drillers set their tools against the rock and put all their weight on the hand-pieces.

The drilling began. It was still broad daylight, and the sun, though invisible behind the mountain, lit up its crest.

It makes me laugh to remember now how I behaved like a crazy, delighted youngster. I kept shouting, "We're drilling, comrades, we're drilling!" I couldn't stand still and so I ran to one of the men and took his place at the drill.

I had handled pneumatic drills before that plenty of times. But this time the drill bounced out of my hands and landed me a blow. I cursed and did not care at all whether my clumsiness caused laughter.

Entirely carried away by my excitement, I picked up the drill, leaned heavily on it, and turned on the air. Under its impact my whole body shook; it tried to wrest itself from my grip, and seemed like a living creature, resisting, wanting to break away, to escape.

But I kept on drilling. At last I regretfully gave the tool back to the driller and was happy to see a smile of approval on his face.

Time slipped by unnoticed. When the drillers suddenly turned off the air and dead silence fell it seemed to me that no more than a few minutes had passed. But by then it was three in the morning.

One of the drillers turned to me and said:

"All set! You can fire the discharge, chief."

His voice sounded unnaturally loud and solemn in the stillness.

I walked over to the face. There were nine dark gaping holes in the rock, in the shape of an irregular rhomboid. The sappers came up. One of them examined the bore-holes to see if they were free of dust, measured their depth and began packing them with charges, ramming them in tightly.

Before long all of the nine holes were packed with explosives and a length of safety fuse trailed from each of them.

We retreated a considerable distance, taking refuge behind loose boulders. Svetlana and I got behind one of the boulders and the others dropped down nearby.

I poked out my head and watched one of the sappers make oblique cuts across the ends of the fuses and start lighting them. This done, both sappers ran to take cover.

The first blast was due in two minutes. My heart pounded loudly.

There was utter silence, not even broken by a rustle of wind. My eyes were on the second hand of my watch. Five seconds remained before we would hear the shots. I ducked my head behind the boulder.

Boom! The first blast, its sound intensified by the mountain echo, quite stunned me. Boom! Boom!... The earth shook at each blast. Nine explosions followed in rapid succession at equal intervals.

We sprang to our feet and ran to the face. Where a few minutes before there had been a smooth surface now yawned a small cave. A pile of crumbling rock lay at the foot of the mountain. We stood for a long time round the little passage cut in the rock, fingering the walls and examining the chipped rock.

When Svetlana and I at last found ourselves alone it was five o'clock in the morning. The workmen had gone off to bed.

"Well, Andrei," said Svetlana, "let's call it a day. I bet you're tired."

I did not feel a bit tired.

"What about yourself? I see you can hardly keep on your feet," I said to her. "Go to sleep. I'll see you to your room."

"The last thing I want to do is sleep," Svetlana cried. "Let's go for a walk instead."

We sauntered away from the mountain, towards the shore of the lake.

It was an unusual lake. Its banks were level with the surface of the water and the land seemed almost indiscernibly to turn into water. Though hidden behind the mountains the sun broke through, as if by a miracle, colouring the water a delicate pink and giving it the appearance of fine glass.

We stretched ourselves on the ground and stared at the water for a long time.

I felt so happy that I was afraid to utter a word. Probably most people know that feeling of inexpressible joy which thrives on silence and which is always spoiled by words.

At such moments I seemed to be living my whole life over again, weighing it over in my mind. I recalled my childhood days, my years at the Institute, my ambitions, my longing to do something big and important. I thought of Svetlana here at my side, realizing that all my fears had been unfounded, for surely she must love me if she had come all the way here to join me.

But how often had I been racked with doubt. Svetlana had been one of the most attractive and popular girls at our Institute. There had been a time when I felt quite in awe of her. Somehow it was amazing how very quickly she could attain anything she had set her heart on. She went in for skiing and soon became the best skier on the campus. I went several times to the country round Moscow to watch her speeding down the highest runs. When she took her long leaps into the air my heart would stand still. To me they were a symbol of her irresistible longing to accomplish great things.

They made me feel so very unimportant and ordinary. I too had my dreams, but they were maturing somewhere deep within me.

Yet my dreams had come true. And Svetlana was with me. There had been nothing more than a few kisses between us. But I knew now that I would take her into my arms with the feeling that she would be mine, that we should never part.

I lay motionless, thinking that there could be no greater joy than that which I was experiencing just then. It was as though I held a cup filled to the brim

with happiness and feared to move my hand so as not to spill a single drop.

When I awoke I heard Svetlana's voice outdoors. She had risen before me. I looked out of the window. Yes, there she was giving instructions to haul away the rock that had been brought down by the blasting. We hadn't laid the rails and our trucks stood idle, so the debris had to be cleared on stretchers.

There was a powdering of dust on Svetlana's overalls and her face seemed quite swarthy, as though it had been tanned by the sun in the last few hours. She looked even prettier than on the day before.

In front of the others I greeted her in a restrained, almost official manner and that made me feel she was all the dearer to me.

Svetlana had the clearing of the debris well organized. Four workmen carried away the rubble and dumped it in a small gully about twenty metres away from the face, while three others were busy timbering the overhanging rock. Hammers rang and saws buzzed.

"In an hour we'll be able to continue the drilling," Svetlana called to me.

I began to think how simple life was fundamentally—if you didn't give way to panic and fears. My troubles, I imagined, were now a thing of the past and the road was open to success.

How sadly mistaken I was!

When the drillers had made new shot-holes and the sappers had packed them with explosives and lit the safety fuses, when the blasts had thundered and the rock-dust had settled, and all of us rushed to the face, I saw that all our previous work had gone for nothing.

In place of the passageway running into the rock there was only a mass of boulders and—the wreckage of the timber props.

I was certain that the reason for our failure was poor timbering and gave orders that more solid props be put up.

Until late that night we kept removing the rubble and shoring up the roof. With each fresh blast the props came down and Svetlana and I could do nothing but "direct" the clearing of the debris.

It was one o'clock in the morning when Svetlana, Agafonov and I gathered in the barracks to discuss the situation. No one spoke. I knew it was up to me to begin but for the life of me I could not utter a word.

"What's the matter, comrades?" Svetlana broke the silence. "Why is everybody so glum? This is not a funeral."

Her loud, bracing tone shook me out of my state of depression.

"As you know," I said, "the details of driving a heading were not elaborated in our technical plan. All the same I'm convinced we're working along correct lines, doing as we've been taught to. Yet we're getting nowhere!"

There was another long silence.

"We all know that." Svetlana spoke in the same loud tones, but with a note of irritation.

"We've got to get to the bottom of why we're not succeeding. I still think the props are to blame."

"The props we put up were good enough," Agafonov put in sullenly.

"That's not the point," Svetlana waved him aside. "I'm talking about the quality of the wood, not the props. Perhaps the timber here in the North is not strong enough."

Agafonov and Nesterev could not help smiling at this remark.

Svetlana's suggestion was an extremely naïve one. Yet I was grateful to her for her cheerful, businesslike tone.

"Here in the North, comrade engineer, mast timber grows," Nesterev pointed out.

"Well, in that case I don't know," Svetlana admitted with a shrug. "Still we've got to come to some decision."

"In any event, we'll have to stop drilling," I said after a long pause.

"Stop? Why?" Svetlana cried.

"For the time being," I said. "We must let the men rest a bit."

I realized that I had said something quite different from what the others expected to hear from me, but I could think of nothing else to say. I was helpless in the face of the atmosphere of depression and bewilderment that had set in after the enthusiasm shown by the workers when the compressor had been installed and the first blasting done. I felt ashamed before all these people including Svetlana. I could not understand the reason for our failure and felt utterly downcast.

We left the barracks. Agafonov and Nesterev went over to the workmen who were still clustered around the face.

"Come, Andrei, let's talk things over," Svetlana urged, tugging at my sleeve.

I followed her into the cubby-hole I had formerly occupied. Svetlana's two suitcases lay on the upper bunk, the lower one was neatly covered with a green blanket, looking very homelike in these unhomely surroundings. A small looking-glass with a dressing-case beside it stood on a locker. An electric bulb hung desolately from a length of wire, with a paper shade around it. By the wall stood an overturned packing-case covered with a piece of check material.

I took all this in as through a mist which blurred my vision.

"Sit down," said Svetlana, making herself comfortable on the bunk. I sat on the packing-case.

"What are we going to do?" she asked.

"I have no idea."

"But this is absurd. What are we after all, engineers or children?"

"Apparently we're incompetent engineers," I said, feeling that the conversation was getting us nowhere.

"At any rate I am."

"For shame, Andrei."

Lowering my head I stared at a crack in the plank floor.

"There must be some solution," said Svetlana confidently. "It's up to us to find it."

I kept silent.

Of course, the simplest solution would be to go to the works, tell them about our failure and beg them to send an expert over.

But I could not bring myself to do this. To admit defeat and my complete helplessness, after only a few days of work, to tell Falaleyev that he was right, and that I was just a pup and an utter fool—that was too much to expect of me.

"What are you thinking about? For heaven's sake say something."

I raised my head. My eyes smarted—perhaps they were tired or I'd got some grit in them.

"I'm thinking about the way I've let my workers down," I replied. "They expected an engineer and they got a dunce instead. I've let you down too."

"Me? How've you done that?"

"Well, you came here because— In short, I talked you into it. And there's not even a place to wash here. You go around in grubby overalls. And you feel just as bad about facing the workers now as I do."

"You're wrong there," said Svetlana hurriedly. "And as for the way I'm dressed, don't worry, I can take care of myself. And I tell you there's no need to snivel. We've got to decide to do something. We've been wrong somewhere, that's what it is."

"Wrong? Five times we've drilled and blasted, and each time there's been the same result."

Svetlana jumped to her feet.

"So what of it?" Her face was pale. "We've got to persevere, we've got to battle with the problem!"

"Well, shall we try a sixth time?"

"Yes, a sixteenth, if need be!"

"Tell that to the men, they'll laugh at us."

"Listen, Andrei," Svetlana spoke in a different tone now, tenderly laying her hand on my shoulder, "what is the matter with you?"

Her voice and the touch of her hand had a wonderful effect on me. I felt that I had a loyal friend in her and that nothing was really lost.

I clasped Svetlana's hand and said impulsively:

"How good it is to have you here. You can't imagine how much I need you."

It was so wonderful to forget everything, if only for a moment, except that Svetlana was there at my side.

Suddenly in the silence broken only by the whining wind I heard a distant explosion. I was puzzled at first but soon I was on my feet and pressing Svetlana's head to my chest.

"What was that?" Svetlana asked, rising to her feet.

"It's Kramov, Kramov!" I cried. "Blasting on the opposite side. Oh, why didn't I think of asking his advice right away! Everything's all right, Svetlana, I'm going over to see him. What a man! If only you knew what a wonderful man he is!"

I lifted Svetlana up in my arms.

"You're crazy," she cried in bewilderment, pressing her hands against my chest and pushing me lightly back.

I put her down on the bunk. Energy and confidence had returned to me. I felt equal to any difficulties now. How could I have felt so low and lost when I had such people to fall back upon like Kramov, Svetlana, Agafo-
nov and Nesterev! They would see me through this. Svetlana kept asking me why I was so excited and who Kramov was. But I was too busy calculating when the food lorry was due and how long it would take me to reach the western sector to reply to her questions. I could get to Kramov in an hour and a half or two hours. Everything was all right.

"Everything's all right," I cried. "Svetlana, you'll soon see Kramov. He's a splendid man. I'm going to fetch him here. He's in charge of the western sector. While I'm away start drilling the shot-holes—as soon as the men have rested. You'll have them ready by the time we return."

I ran outside to listen for the lorry.

5

There were three of us in the front seat of the lorry—Kramov, the driver and I. Kramov sat with his shirt-sleeves rolled up to the elbow and his hands on his knees. I stole a glance at him and smiled to myself. It was good to be sitting here beside him.

I didn't have to ask Kramov to come, he suggested it himself. After listening to my story, he tapped his pipe out on his heel and said:

"Andrei, I'll drive over with you and take a look."

As we approached the site I could not hear any sounds of drilling, only the howling of the head wind that slashed at the lorry. I thought that Svetlana must have

completed the drilling and was now waiting for our arrival.

But when the construction site came into view I saw nothing. The workmen as before were thronged around the face. Four hours had passed since I had gone for Kramov but the place looked exactly as I had left it. The men standing there prevented me from seeing whether the shot-holes were ready.

Svetlana was coming towards us. I at once sensed a change in her. She walked too rapidly, her hands deep in the pockets of her overalls and her head thrust slightly back. For all that there was a touch of weariness and a lack of confidence in her gait.

We climbed out of the lorry.

"Have the charge-holes been drilled?" I asked her cheerfully. And turned to Kramov, "Meet our new engineer, Svetlana Alexeyevna Odintsova."

Kramov cast a swift, hardly perceptible glance at Svetlana and bowed.

She wanted to shake hands with him and had stretched out her right hand, but seeing how dirty it was she put it back into her pocket.

"Well, what about the shot-holes?" I repeated on our way to the mountain.

"Andrei, we've had one trouble after another," Svetlana said in a low voice so that Kramov should not hear.

"What's happened?"

"The compressor's got out of control and the drills have gone blunt."

Judging by Svetlana's tone I had expected something worse. The drills gone blunt? Well, we had spare ones. Why was she at a loss?

We reached the mountain and a single glance was enough to tell me that the charge-holes had not been drilled. I took Agafonov aside and asked:

"What's happened, Fyodor Ivanovich?"

"Some devilry's going on in that face and it doesn't let us work," he replied.

"What d'you mean?" I asked with annoyance.

"What I say. The points of the drills have been blunted and some are quite flattened. We must have struck a boulder."

"But you know what you have to do in a case like that, don't you?"

"I know we've got to work around it and then blow it up."

"Well?"

"I'm not in charge here," said Agafonov glumly. "Our engineer got all worked up. 'Go on drilling,' she said, 'we've got to persevere.' Then the compressor began to wheeze, and the lady got scared and stopped the work till you come back."

After that incident I noticed a new, strange side to Svetlana's character, something I had not known before. She seemed to get nervous and frightened whenever she had to act on her own.

But no, I'm not telling the truth. I noticed nothing at all then. I am making it all up now.

It was not until late in the evening that we had dislodged the heavy boulder, blasted it, reinforced the roofing, and drilled fresh charge-holes in the face.

When the drilling began Kramov stood behind the drillers and watched them working.

Svetlana and I stood beside him. Svetlana showed no trace of her former nervousness. She was herself again, the spring was back in her step and there was assurance in her voice.

She supervised the dislodging of the boulder, which was brought crashing down to the foot of the face. She gave orders to drill the charge-holes and sap them.

When according to my calculations the charge-holes had been drilled to only half their requisite depth Kramov suddenly cried, "Stop!" and ordered the sappers to pack the charges.

The blasts thundered out.

Without waiting for the dust to settle I rushed to the face.

The roof had not come down. The long-awaited passageway yawned in the side of the mountain. We had driven a heading.

I felt a hand clutch my elbow. Kramov stood beside me.

"Well, neighbour?" he said, taking me aside. "I guessed from the first that you were drilling too deep and packing in too powerful a charge. That's why that damn timbering kept coming down. And now it is clear to me, and to you too, I hope."

The obviousness of the explanation stunned me. Through sheer impatience to cut as fast and deep as possible I had made the drillers go too deep into the rock.

"So much effort and labour gone to waste," I said aloud bitterly. "And the whole thing is so simple."

"No, old man, it's not simple at all," chuckled Kramov. "Cutting is a tricky business. It requires a trained eye and a feeling for the rock to decide what is the best and fastest way to drive into the mountain. These come with experience. When the gallery is cut, then too powerful a charge will only smash the propping nearest the face. It is not likely to affect the rest and the gallery itself will not suffer. But when you're just starting, everything's hanging by a thread. Your heading's only a metre deep—that's why special consideration must be given to the props. Everything in order, I take it, Svetlana Alexeyevna?" Kramov asked Svetlana as she joined us.

"Our mistake is clear," she replied. "We've been stuffing the holes with too powerful charges. Am I right?"

She stood facing Nikolai Nikolayevich with her customary stance—hands in overall pockets, shoulders thrust slightly back. Kramov smiled. It wasn't quite a smile, just an ironic flicker in his eyes.

"See how simple it all is," he said graciously. "I'm certain you could have managed on your own."

I wished somehow he had been sharper with Svetlana. Surely her self-assurance was annoying to him.

But Kramov seemed not in the least annoyed. He shook hands heartily with both of us, slipped his empty pipe into his pocket and strode over to the lorry.

This casual leave-taking which precluded any expression of gratitude on our part—he had come, helped us and left, that's all—redoubled my admiration for him.

That night a reporter from the regional newspaper arrived. I was still awake when his dilapidated jeep, with its tarpaulin hood flapping in the wind, pulled up.

The reporter was a man in his late thirties who spoke in a very slow, deliberate and I would say elementary manner, as though doubting the ability of others to understand him. It's the way, I suppose, you should speak to a foreigner when you're not sure he understands your language, and you don't want to put him in an awkward position. I had a feeling that the reporter had acquired this manner of speaking through long practice.

"I'm from the regional newspaper, *The Soviet North*," he announced by way of introduction. "Something important has taken place here, or is taking place or going to take place?"

"You're referring to our driving a heading?" I asked.

"Exactly."

"You're late, man, for it took place four hours ago."

"Well it doesn't matter. We'll reconstruct the course of events. Describe to me what happened, in detail, with all the particulars. I'm interested not only in the time of day and the event itself, but in all the attendant circumstances as well: the general atmosphere, the talk. I want a complete picture. Do you get me?"

He spoke like one who was certain he would be told things that did not interest him in the least.

"Tell me," I asked, "from whom did you learn what we've been doing here?"

"We newspapermen know everything," he replied, then evidently thinking this statement somewhat vague added, "I've been in your district for some days and heard about what you're doing here about an hour ago at the office of the district paper."

"But how did they know about it?"

The reporter shrugged.

"Don't you expect the district newspaper to know what's going on in its own district?"

He was right, of course. And just then the idea occurred to me that I could use this reporter to repay my debt of gratitude to Kramov. I wanted as many people as possible to know of the help he rendered us.

"You see," the reporter went on, "from what I know you're a young engineer and this is your first independent job," the reporter continued. "We want to run a series in our paper featuring a number of stories on the subject 'Young Soviet Specialists Arrive for Work in the Far North.'"

"You see," I began, unconsciously imitating the reporter's manner of speaking, "I regret to say that I am not the man who carried the day. It was Kramov, the chief of the western sector, who was mainly responsible for our success. It is about him that I want to tell you.

You could write an article on the exchange of experience, or on how specialists of long standing help younger men. To my mind that's a very important subject."

The reporter livened up. He was accustomed to "drawing out" people at interviews; evidently it was a pleasant surprise to have someone suggest a lead to him.

"That's not a bad idea," he said. "That might run to a column. It seems to fit in quite well with the general theme of our series. You say his name is Kramov?"

We parted at two o'clock in the morning. The reporter went off with half a pad full of facts. When his jeep had disappeared round the bend in the road I stood wondering: Had I told him everything I knew about Kramov? Did he realize what type of man Kramov was? Would he draw Kramov for his readers as I saw him?

A few days later I read the article about Kramov in the regional newspaper. It ran to three columns with a picture of Kramov in the centre.

I read it through quickly and rushed to Svetlana with it.

Standing behind her as she read I ran my eyes over the article once again. I was happy that so many pleasant things were said about Kramov and that now everyone would know what a splendid person he was and how he had helped us out of difficulty.

To my astonishment Svetlana shrugged her shoulders and handed the paper back to me without saying a word. Feeling quite bewildered I muttered:

"It's a good article."

Svetlana looked oddly at me.

"What are you so happy about? It says that we've made a mess of things and if Kramov hadn't shown up—"

"Svetlana," I interrupted her, "how can you talk that way? He got us out of a hole, didn't he? Surely you haven't forgotten?"

Svetlana's glance was somewhat scornful.

"So he did help us. But what's there to rejoice about?"

I thought I understood her mood and laughed.

"Svetlana, it's your wounded vanity speaking," I said. "You're vexed because we failed to cope with the situation without outside help."

"And you're pleased that we couldn't do without a nurse," Svetlana replied with sudden irritation and walked off to the face.

I looked after her greatly puzzled. She seemed quite taut, her shoulders so sharply thrust back that I could see the hollow between the shoulder blades under her overalls. Perhaps it was because she was walking straight into a fierce gale.

6

Kramov turned up on our sector the following Sunday.

"Get ready, comrades," he cried catching sight of me from afar.

I was on my way to see Svetlana—we had decided to spend the day together in the mountains. She must have heard Kramov's voice and the sound of his car because she appeared in the doorway before I knocked.

This was the first time since Svetlana's arrival that I had seen her out of overalls. She was wearing a red skirt and white blouse, and her hair was no longer tucked up under a kerchief but was drawn back with a ribbon to keep it tidy.

Kramov, smiling broadly, came towards us.

"I've got a splendid idea, comrades," he said. "Let's go to the lake. Not to the one close by but to another

about fifteen kilometres away. The fishermen there have got a motorboat and I've arranged for them to let us have it. We could spend a couple of hours on the lake and then come back. What do you say?"

"Wonderful!" I cried, and glanced at Svetlana.

She said nothing, making me feel awkward.

"You don't seem to care much for my suggestion," said Kramov without showing offence but, I thought, a little sadly.

"It's just that Andrei Vasilyevich and I had planned to go for a walk in the mountains," said Svetlana, using my full name, which she rarely did.

"But we are going to the mountains," said Kramov.

"Let's go, Svetlana," I said firmly.

Svetlana slightly raised her long eyebrows, which almost met on the bridge of her nose.

"All right," she said. "Let's go."

Now that so much time had elapsed since that boat-ing trip, I keep wondering whether that was not the cause of everything. No, it wasn't. What was to hap-pen had begun earlier. It was there all along some-where inside us—even before we met at the tunnel site or had our first conversation, before we drove the head-ing, before the article in the newspaper and before the outing to the lake. As for the outing, if one thinks of it apart from other things, nothing special hap-pened then.

We drove along a road so beautiful that I shall re-member it as long as I live. The car sped along the shore of the lake, above the still water, with a beauti-ful view of the mountains opening up around us. On each side of the road lay boulders of various shapes and

colours. The road ran uphill and it was amazing to come across small lakes all the time at that height. They were like flat plates filled to the brim with water. And it seemed that the slightest stir would break the surface tension.

The countryside was deserted; we did not meet a soul on the way. Occasionally it seemed to me that there were villages and hamlets scattered over the hill-sides among the trees, but they were only huge boulders which looked like cottages from a distance.

It was midday when we drove up to the fishermen's landing-stage. Kramov picked up a small case and the canvas bag with a sectional fishing rod in it, and then ran down to the landing-stage. The motor-launch had not arrived and we had to wait about two hours for it; at last we heard the shrill sound of its hooter and it came into view.

We settled in the bows. The engine backfired once or twice and the boat, cutting light bands in the grey water, glided towards the hazy outlines of distant mountains.

It was a splendid trip. We drifted past masses of dense forest, over which hung wisps of mist like the haze that settles over the mountains at daybreak. Evening was upon us and the round red sun sailed over the woods as though trying to race us. The distant mountains vanished from view.

We sped through a narrow gap between two sheer cliffs and a new chain of mountains came into sight. The nearest were distinctly visible but those farthest away looked like wreaths of dense mist.

"Well, friends, I hope you're not annoyed with me for bringing you here," said Kramov.

"Not at all," cried Svetlana. "It's marvellous! I keep thinking—if only the people in Moscow could see me

drifting like this amidst mountains in the evening in the bright arctic sunshine."

She spoke with a sudden—how shall I put it?—abandon and I eyed her with surprise. She seemed to have become oblivious of everything in the world, and was conscious only of herself against the background of these magic mountains.

Once again she was the Svetlana I admired so much back at home when, flinging her arms wide apart, she would zigzag down from a hill-top.

I loved to see her like that. At such moments it seemed to me that she was a part of myself, expressing an urge that dwelt within me but which I could not, was perhaps too shy, to express.

"Are you from Moscow too?" Kramov asked.

"Too? Yes, I am too, if you are," Svetlana replied.

For a while we kept silent. Soon Svetlana's mood was transmitted to me and I said:

"When I look at those bleak, far-away inaccessible mountains I want to scale them and see what's beyond."

"Wasn't it Przhevalsky who said, 'Distance beckons to the nomad's soul?'" said Kramov. "You're a nomad, Andrei."

A certain degree of formality crept into Kramov's tone when he spoke to me in the presence of Svetlana.

We floated between ridges to the right and left of us. The rays of the sun shone at such an angle that the mountains on the right looked sombre and forbidding, while on the left a rosy world of vapoury vistas, wreathed in mist, stretched into the distance.

At last we drew near to the mountains which from afar had looked like swirls of mist, and could see the trees that clad their slopes.

A few minutes later we moored at a long jetty stretching far out into the lake.

We stepped ashore. From the mountain-side the lake looked very much like a bay. Its surface was serenely still and the pines on the bank were so distinctly reflected in it that every twig was plainly distinguishable.

Kramov and Svetlana walked ahead. I followed.

We made our way along a path through a dense wood of pine and birch. We followed it for about three hundred metres, then climbed a stony path to the left bank and skirted a terrace which led to the dry bed. We could hear the invisible water gurgling under the boulders. Then we reached a valley.

I had never imagined that these parts were so rich in minerals. Only the Urals are said to be richer. The most remarkable specimens were scattered about here. I was fascinated by them and as I kept stuffing my pockets with red, pink and sparkling blue stones I did not even notice Kramov and Svetlana far ahead, in lively conversation.

When at last I overtook them I spread my collection before them.

"D'you know of whom you remind me now, Andrei?" said Kramov with a smile as he tossed one of the stones into the air and caught it. "Of the miserly knight who was no less delighted with his treasures. But the stones are really wonderful, I admit."

Svetlana gave the stones a casual glance. All at once I felt awkward—like a youngster caught with his pockets and hands full of stones.

We reached a stream and followed it down to a gorge buried in gloom even on that bright sunny evening. It had forced its way through the mountains and formed a number of rapids and cascades. Soon we heard a rumbling that grew louder and louder.

"A waterfall," cried Svetlana, and broke into a run.

Soon we reached it. About ten metres from the precipice. The river flowed so calmly that the current was hardly perceptible. You had only to toss a match-box into it to see it float gently and surely to the edge of the waterfall.

But as we went on the water grew turbulent, and we could distinguish several currents in it now, forming whirlpools eddying round the pebbles; finally the water rose in a gentle cascade and went tumbling and roaring down in a waterfall.

"How beautiful!" Svetlana cried. "Doesn't a waterfall remind you of a huge infuriated beast with the foam running down its jaws?"

I couldn't tell if the waterfall resembled a beast but it was certainly a splendid sight. Brown cliffs, polished to a dull lustre down which the water leapt, slipping over the boulders in a thin sheet, gleamed in the rays of the sun. Farther on, some ten metres from the foot of the fall, the water grew less turbulent, the current became sluggish, almost imperceptible. It was unbelievable that this water had been a frothing tumult only a few minutes before.

The rumble of the falling water and the icy splashes that spattered my face filled me with exuberant spirits.

"Oho-oo. We're he-ee-ee-ere!" I cried, trying to drown the thunder and roar of the waterfall. But my voice was hardly audible. Then I cried louder still:

"We're he-ee-ere!"

Kramov said with a smile to Svetlana, "The fellow'll lose his voice."

He led us away from the waterfall.

We walked for about another kilometre down a brambly path.

"We'll do a spot of fishing here," Kramov declared. He dropped his bag and from its case drew his finely-varnished sectional rod and a reel of silk.

"Where will you get the worms?" I asked.

"Worms are a sorry bait used only by inexperienced fishermen," replied Kramov gaily. "We'll get the fish to bite on metal."

He stretched to his full height and using both hands whipped the air with the glistening rod.

There was a wary and crafty smile on his face. He stole a quick glance at Svetlana but then concentrated all his attention on the water. Without changing his position, he slowly bent back his entire body. Then with a quick forward movement he cast the line.

We heard the whirr as the reel spun, saw the line flash in the air and plop into the water. It was a fascinating sight.

Kramov walked slowly on along the bank and, turning the handle of the reel, drew the line out of the water. With a sudden shout of "Got one!" he began to reel in the line more quickly.

In a moment or two a fair-sized salmon lay flapping on the bank.

"Get it off the hook!" Kramov cried to me.

I ran forward and picked up the fish, which began to flap all the more violently in my grip. The hook had caught deep in its gullet. The spoon-bait jerked above the hook in unison with the convulsive throes of the salmon.

"Get it off quickly," cried Svetlana, with a grimace.

It was no easy matter to remove the hook, which had gone through the throat and pierced the gills. Bright red drops trickled to the grass.

"I never knew fish blood was so red," said Svetlana turning her face away.

At last I managed to free the hook and drop the fish into a small pool on the bank.

"What puzzled me," I said, "is how the fish could be caught without a bait."

Svetlana and Kramov broke into laughter and Kramov explained patiently that in the water the metal bait turns and glitters. The salmon mistakes that glitter for a small fish, tries to swallow it and gets caught.

"Let me try," Svetlana cried suddenly, almost snatching the rod out of Kramov's hands. Once again she was transformed as in the boat, her face was flushed and her eyes shone.

Slashing the air she cast the line into the water and began to turn the reel.

I watched her, in great doubt as to the outcome of her attempt, but suddenly the rod jerked a little in her hands.

"A bite! A bite!" Svetlana cried, delighted.

"Play him!" Kramov cried.

Svetlana jerked hastily. Something flashed over the water and up came—an empty hook.

"You shouldn't have done it so fast," Kramov chided gently. "The fish mustn't suspect that its end is near. Desperation only increases its resistance. You must play the fish and pull carefully. Try again."

But Svetlana shrugged and handed the rod to Kramov. The light had gone out of her eyes.

"It's too difficult," she said.

Kramov cast a few more times and before long four more fish lay flapping on the bank.

I hardly had time to take them off the hook. And just when the fishing was going so well Kramov dismantled his rod and put it away in its case.

"Let's get going," he said picking up his bag.

"And the fish?" I asked, puzzled. "Aren't we going to take them?"

Kramov shrugged.

"Why should we? We've got better things to eat here,"

he nodded towards his bag. "Scaling fish is a wearisome business. And I loathe the smell of fish."

"Then why do you catch them?"

"For the fun of it," said Kramov with a chuckle. "Come along."

We made ourselves comfortable on a low shelf of bare rock. We could view the waterfall from there, but it was too far away to interfere with our conversation.

Kramov opened his case and took out of it two bottles of *Stolichnaya* vodka, salami, a tin of crab, some smoked salmon, bread and two plastic tumblers.

Laying out the refreshments on a large flat boulder, he said:

"There's no wine—couldn't get any dry wine, our shop doesn't stock it. They say it's no drink for the climate here."

"I detest dry wine, I'd rather have vodka," Svetlana remarked with a mischievous twinkle.

"Splendid!" said Kramov.

"What's splendid about it? Do you like to see tipsy women?" Svetlana asked, raising her shoulders slightly. "I think it's a disgusting sight."

"I hate all drunks, men or women," said Kramov. "Nor have I any particular liking for women who put on airs and languidly sip some beastly rubbish. I don't trust them."

"You don't trust them because you think that in their heart of hearts they're hankering for vodka," Svetlana commented, and laughed.

"No, I just don't trust them and that's all."

I uncorked the bottles and began pouring out the vodka. There were only two tumblers. Kramov made another apologetic gesture.

"I'm so sorry. But that's all I've brought. Andrei and I will drink in turn."

"Oh, it's all right," said Svetlana, "Andrei doesn't drink."

"Who told you I didn't?" I demanded rather sharply.

"You do drink? That's fine!" Kramov said placatingly. "I'll drink what's left in the bottle. And if it's a third full it'll suit me all right."

He filled my tumbler up to the brim.

"If Andrei really doesn't drink he should be proud of it," Kramov continued. "Napoleon, they say, drank nothing except water and said that only dull people required artificial stimulants. He needed no wine to stimulate him."

That sort of talk was beginning to annoy me.

"I wish you would stop making me the subject of your talk," I said loudly. "And as far as I know you don't drink either. Remember you refused at the party?"

"That was a different matter," replied Kramov. "I had educational reasons for refusing."

"All right," I said. "We drink then!"

I raised my tumbler.

"Hold your horses!" cried Kramov. "D'you mean to tell me you've come all the way to the Arctic to sit here in the midnight sun and down your first drink without a toast? Nothing doing! I propose a toast to Andrei, to his success and happiness. We are at times displeased with the writers of today for idealizing their characters too much and do not believe that such people really exist. But look at Andrei. Isn't he the ideal Soviet type of young man? You agree with me, Svetlana Alexeyevna, don't you?" Kramov asked suddenly.

"Of course," Svetlana replied quickly. "Andrei is a fine type."

My face must have turned scarlet.

"Say, comrades, that's outright foolishness," I began.

Kramov interrupted me.

"So we drink to Andrei. No objections! Here goes!"

He gulped the vodka down straight from the bottle.

I had no wish to drink. I couldn't explain it, but something had come between us, something that alarmed me and set me on my guard. I wanted to get rid of that feeling, to crush it, to wave it aside, so that things might be as they had been before.

Perhaps that was the reason why I suddenly downed my drink. But the sensation persisted. I was seized by an irresistible desire to speak about it and to look Kramov in the eyes.

"I didn't feel like drinking to that toast of yours, Nikolai Nikolayevich," I said. "It was out of place. I'm no hero. I drank only because both of you did. Thanks, of course. Yet I want you to know I'm no symbol, no ideal, that's sheer nonsense, you'll forgive me for saying so. After all, I'm just starting life."

"But you have grand plans, haven't you?" Kramov interrupted.

He spoke so sincerely and kindly that all my irritation vanished.

"I have, Nikolai Nikolayevich," I replied.

"Let's hear them."

"It's hard to speak of them off hand. Besides they're still pretty hazy. But when I look at these mountains I feel I want to dig a tunnel through each one of them."

"You'll need more than a lifetime to do that," said Kramov, and smiled. "You look at the mountains with the eyes of a poet, not an engineer."

"Perhaps, perhaps," I said.

Svetlana, her hands locked round her folded knees, was looking intently at me.

"What about getting on with the drinks?" Nikolai Nikolayevich said in a loud, emphatic voice. He took

my tumbler, hastily filled it with vodka, and drank it down.

"I want to propose one more toast," he said with a sudden change of tone, refilling the tumbler with averted eyes. "You're both too young to have been at the war," he continued. "You launched out on your own in life after the war was over. That's your gain as well as your loss. Loss because you've missed a great deal. B-but that's n-not the point."

He was stuttering noticeably now. He can't hold his drinks any too well, I thought.

"During the war I met two types of men," Kramov continued. "There were those who spent the whole of the war in the trenches. They advanced when they were ordered to do so, but on the whole they were content to sit for months in a dug-out full of marsh water. They obeyed regulations all right. But there was the other kind, those who asked to go where things were hottest—on reconnaissance, for instance. It was death or glory for them. In terms of tension and danger one day of their war service was equivalent to a month of trench life. Many of them fell in battle. But those who survived won glory and esteem. They did not drag out the payment of their civic debt to the state for years but paid it punctually at a single stroke."

"And afterwards?" I asked on an impulse.

"A-afterwards?" echoed Kramov and added softly, "that's a different matter." He raised his tumbler. "I d-drink to the brave, to those ready to take risks."

"No," I exclaimed suddenly, "I'm not going to drink to that!"

"Why n-not?" Kramov asked, flinging back his head.

"You'll forgive me," I said, hurrying and eager for Kramov not to miss my point. "I respect you—I like you, Nikolai Nikolayevich. You've helped us out of a

fix. And I admire brave people. But you were somehow wrong just now. I can't say exactly why. Perhaps I've had too much to drink."

"Have some more!" Kramov exclaimed, a sudden harshness in his tone. "You don't know life the way I do! I know it inside out. Let's drink!"

"I can't!"

"All right. I drink alone again."

Slowly he drank down the vodka.

"You shouldn't back out like that." Kramov's voice was kinder. "You, too, are spoiling for battle, aren't you? Remember you tried to shout down the waterfall. But that was a futile effort. Do you remember the man who tried to ride down Niagara Falls? In a tub, wasn't it? And now I suggest we take a dive, and we don't need a tub either."

Trying hard to walk steadily he strode towards the waterfall.

I'm still amused, or rather ashamed at what happened after that. It was as though something pulled me to my feet, for there I was running after Kramov, stripping as I went.

Svetlana, who had been watching us in a sort of stupor but full of curiosity, suddenly rushed after me and shouted to Kramov:

"Stop! Stop this foolishness right away, Nikolai Nikolayevich. I insist!"

Kramov walked on. Svetlana caught up with him and said vehemently:

"All right. Take your dip. But alone—wait until Andrei and I are out of sight. Come on, Andrei."

For a moment or two we stood motionless. Then Kramov turned to us and said quite casually:

"The swim's off, comrades. I'd forgotten that the water's very cold in mountain streams. No swimming."

In a leisurely way we walked down to the lake, where the motor-launch was waiting for us.

The outing was spoiled. Silently we boarded the boat. In an effort to forget the unpleasant little incident we tried to talk of other things as people generally do in such circumstances. But our talk and gaiety somehow soon fizzed out and the sense of awkwardness grew stronger.

We reached the landing-stage at about three in the morning. Kramov's car was waiting for us.

He drove us home and said as he left us, "I must apologize, friends. I had a drop too much."

His tone was so unaffected and sincere as he uttered these words that I hastily declared, "We had a wonderful time!"

"Glad to hear it," said Kramov with a wry smile and, wishing us a cordial good night, drove away.

We were alone and were reluctant to part. Apparently we both felt how necessary it was to blot out the unfortunate impression left by the trip.

I saw Svetlana to the door of her room.

"Somehow I can't make Kramov out," I said. "I suppose he shouldn't drink. That's what drink does to some people. Remember Volodya Spirin who lived on the same landing as we did? He was a quiet, even-tempered chap, but as soon as he had a drink he changed completely."

Svetlana did not reply.

"I lost my senses, too," I went on with embarrassment. "First it was that stupid toast and then that swimming idea of his."

"He's a strange creature," Svetlana said in a low, pensive voice.

Glad that she had broken the silence I snatched at her last words.

"What's so strange about him? It's only that we are just kids compared to him. He belongs to a different gen-

eration. He's seen and gone through much in life. We mustn't forget that. School and Institute, that's as far as our experience of life goes, while he's got the building of tunnels, the war, long years of life behind him."

"And what's that got to do with what's happened?"

"Surely you must see that we can't judge Kramov by our own narrow standards. His ways of thinking, his associations may not always be clear to us. His mind works differently from ours. Not everything is as simple as two and two makes four, Svetlana."

"You're probably right there," Svetlana replied thoughtfully. I could not understand whether her reply referred to my opinion of Kramov or to my remark regarding "two and two."

Somehow the conversation was not getting us anywhere. I had no idea what was in Svetlana's mind at that moment. At the same time I could not leave her like that. I felt we ought not to part without having said something more to each other.

"May I come in?" I asked.

"Why, of course."

I followed her into her tiny room. Svetlana lowered the blind and lit the lamp. I sat down on the bunk. She stood leaning against the wall. I noticed her glance travel slowly from the rough beams of the walls to the bunk on which her dresses lay in disorder, to the dusty overalls hanging on a nail, to the paper lamp-shade, already warped and faded from the sun.

Then she raised her head and looked at the ceiling. What was she thinking about? Moscow? The mountains among which we had just been boating?

Suddenly I felt with all my heart, all my being, that there was something on Svetlana's mind from which I must at once divert her, something that was making her drift away from me.

And that feeling of peace and certainty that Svetlana loved me, that I was no longer to be a prey to doubts on that score, that nothing could come between us and separate us, that radiant feeling of contentment, suddenly left me.

I felt an aching void within me.

I must fill that void at once. I must not go away, must not part from Svetlana, not for a single moment. From this minute on we must be together, not only in mind but in body too.

I went up to Svetlana and took her in my arms. My heart was pounding and for a long time I could not utter a word. But Svetlana remained as distant as ever. True, she laid her arm on my shoulder but her thoughts were a long way off.

And then she seemed to come back to me as though from a long journey. Her fingers came to life on my shoulder. She smiled, drew my head close to hers and pressed her face against my cheek.

"Svetlana, darling," I said, "let's be together from now on, let's never, never part. Now, now—I won't leave you. I want to be with you for all time."

She took my face between her warm hands and kissed me on the lips.

Then pushing me away gently, she sat down on the bunk and said:

"Sit down and calm yourself. Let's sit quietly like this for a while."

I sat beside her.

"Andrei darling, you must go," she said with conviction and an effort at composure.

"I won't!"

"Now, don't interrupt me," she commanded. After a pause she continued, "We can't live together in a room like this. You must realize that it's quite impossible."

"What? The size of the room?"

"How impatient you are. I am here with you, aren't I? I came to you. We're together here."

She looked me straight in the eyes and asked:

"But perhaps you don't believe me?"

I believed her. I believed once again. The void that had been within me a short time before was gone.

"And now go to bed," Svetlana said, rising. "Go, I beg you."

There was something in her voice, something tender and at the same time insistent, that forced me to submit. An hour later, as I lay awake on my hard bunk in the barracks, listening to the even breathing of my sleeping companions, I still could not understand why I had agreed to go, why I had not stayed with her.

Yet I had not stayed. Perhaps the change-over from a feeling that I was losing something to a sense of having regained it was too sudden, and had shaken me too much.

7

A month went by.

Our sector was unrecognizable now. We had cut a gallery running sixty metres into the mountain, and two electric locomotives were running along the rails.

Only a short while before I had had the feeling of having come to a backward, forsaken place; when we had begun work, we had only five pneumatic drills, ten trucks and a decrepit engine. Now it seemed to me that the blasts of our shot-firing and the noise of our drills resounded throughout the country. Gone was the feeling that we were in a backwood. An electric locomotive had arrived, and then another, and new 32-kilogramme pneumatic drills had been delivered. We fitted up a charging station for the locomotives and installed two new compressors.

In those days the tunnel and the men formed one whole. Don't misunderstand me. I am not indulging in symbolism, but describing things as they were. The working had its rhythm and that became the rhythm of our lives.

The attack against the mountain went on right round the clock. A pall of dust hung thick over the face, in which five pneumatic drills were at work. The dust dispersed for a short while when the drilling ceased and the sappers placed their ammonal charges in the holes. That happened six times every twenty-four hours. Six times, day or night, everyone left the tunnel to be replaced by sappers with their canvas bags filled with charges.

And then the blasts shook the mountain. And in place of the pall of dust there rose a wall of rubble. The neighbouring mountains echoed with the blasts, the water in the usually still lake stirred and rippled.

During those days I felt stronger than I had ever felt in my life. I accounted for my early setbacks by the fact that at the Institute we were taught to use the most up-to-date machinery and here when we hadn't got it I was not prepared for emergencies. That was why I had been at a loss. But everything was quite different now. Svetlana and I felt fully armed.

Yet I am not writing the truth. I am giving way to the desire ever present at the back of my mind to find simple and crude explanations for the experiences I went through.

It is naïve, of course, to assert that with the arrival of the new equipment all my doubts and anxieties were resolved.

It is difficult for me to analyze my relations with Svetlana. But from that memorable night on I felt that an unanswered question stood between Svetlana and myself—nothing tangible, nothing you could discuss or argue about.

All the same it was there, creating a rift between us. Suddenly I realized that Svetlana had not yet made up her mind to marry me.

There were good reasons why we should postpone our marriage. For one thing, we had nowhere to live. For another, family relations between the chief of a sector and the engineer who was in fact his assistant might set tongues wagging. In short, there were many quite simple explanations for Svetlana's hesitation.

However, something told me that these were not the real reasons, or at least not the only ones, behind Svetlana's attitude.

Since that night we had not really been alone once. As a matter of fact there was hardly any time for private talk. We were both so exhausted after the long day's work that we hardly had the energy to get to our beds.

But the feeling of victory and the sense that we had overcome our difficulties did not remain with us long.

The point was that as we moved deeper into the mountain our rate of advance lagged behind that of the western sector. Every day Kramov gained a metre or a half a metre on us and at the end of the week we were always left far behind him.

We were now connected by telephone with the western sector and the works. Every Saturday I would pick up the receiver and, not without some anxiety, call up Kramov to ask, "Well, what success, Nikolai Nikolaevich?"

And it invariably turned out that Kramov was ahead of us. My call would be followed by a ring from the works. Falaleyev would inform me that we were four, five or seven metres behind the western sector and that "in the final count we must draw our conclusions from that."

Our relations with Kramov did not seem to have undergone any change since that trip on the lake. He

phoned us now and again and would sometimes drop in on Sundays. With Svetlana he had established a friendly and businesslike relationship. In her tone, however, I seemed to detect now and then a veiled note of hostility.

Perhaps I am mistaken and hostility is not quite the word. Svetlana's manner was cautious and distrustful rather than hostile. Whenever I happened to hear them talking, even on the most harmless matters or on business, I noticed some sort of hidden undercurrent.

But I am running ahead.

That day we were cutting the hundredth metre of our passage into the mountain.

There was nothing particularly remarkable about that figure, no cause for celebration.

Yet it buoyed up our spirits and put us in a festive mood. That morning the workmen shaved with particular care. Someone hoisted little red pennants at the tunnel entrance. The men who were going to drill the charge-holes for the hundredth metre and the sappers who were to blast the rock felt as though they were the heroes of the day.

After the holes had been drilled and black apertures appeared head-high on the face of the rock I gave orders for the blasting to begin.

Two sappers who were sitting with their canvas satchels handy rose with deliberation, picked up the satchels and walked to the face. Their faces wore an expression that was grave, even somewhat grim, with a touch of superiority: these men had come to accomplish something real and significant, dangerous and essential, after other men had done less important and hazardous jobs.

One of the sappers unscrewed the rubber tube of a pneumatic drill, attached a metal nozzle to the tube, and

directed the jet of air into the charge-holes to clear them of dust. Next he slowly measured the depth of the holes to determine the amount of explosives required.

The junior of the two handed his mate the long, red ammonal cartridges in their oiled-paper wrappings and the other placed them unhurriedly in the holes. The sappers thus engaged seemed to be oblivious of their surroundings. At last they left the face and their gaze fell on the drillers who were standing at a distance.

A look at once questioning and condescending passed over their faces. It was the kind of look that grown-ups cast at children guilty of being somewhere they have no business to be.

From that moment on, according to regulations, the sappers were in complete command of the gallery. We vacated it. A few minutes later the two sappers came running out and a moment after that came the roar of the explosives. The first hundred metres of the working had been completed.

After the ventilators had aired the gallery, clearing the explosive gases from it, we ran to the face.

That evening Kramov came over, bringing with him two bottles of wine. The three of us gathered in Svetlana's cubby-hole.

I sat on the bunk next to Svetlana and suddenly began to resent Kramov's presence.

With the wine my resentment melted away and the knowledge that we had scored a victory drove everything else out of our heads. Kramov spoke so sincerely about our work, about the value of friendship, and so on, that I once again felt quite kindly disposed towards him.

Later I went to see him to his car. We strolled along the shore of the lake towards the road running to the western sector. We paused to admire the lake.

It happens now and then that a person up to his ears in work or in some problem does not notice how he is living, does not know if he is happy or unhappy. He is swept up in the turmoil of events. But suddenly the turmoil dies down. He is alone with himself and only then begins to realize how things have been going for him of late.

So it was with me at the lake. I ceased to hear the rumble of my work. A silence had set in. We had done a hundred metres of tunnelling, the three of us had just spent a friendly evening together, and now as we stood in the stillness of the arctic night I suddenly felt a deep satisfaction with the life I was leading.

I spoke softly to Kramov as though fearful of ruffling the water.

"Nikolai Nikolayevich, you have no idea how good I feel. It is as though I could chew that tunnel all by myself with my bare hands."

"Now that's an unpardonable delusion for an engineer," Kramov said with a good-humoured smile.

"I know you think I'm talking like a kid. But just now I feel so full of energy, so wild with an urge to work well. Just think, Nikolai Nikolayevich, what a lucky fellow I am; I've got everything I want. I wanted to become a tunnelling engineer and I did. I wanted to go to some far-away place where I could handle a job on my own—and got there. I feel like one reborn. Life has taken on a new meaning for me. I realize now that to live fully you have to learn and learn, learn things you'll never be taught at any school. Don't think I'm referring to the setbacks we've had with the compressor and the heading. I'm thinking in wider terms. A first-hand knowledge of life—that is what one must have."

"I suspect there is another reason for your feeling so happy."

"What d'you mean?"

"There's something in this world which different people give different names to," said Kramov narrowing his eyes and looking at me. "Some call it love, some are shy and call it simply affection, others call it infatuation."

At that moment a thought flashed across my mind: Why was I keeping my love a secret from Kramov? In him I had a friend, a true friend, who had helped me out of great difficulties. Perhaps he could help me now.

And yielding to the urge to speak of my love I poured out my heart to Kramov.

All through my stuttering, feverish confession, Kramov kept staring at the lake. Suddenly I realized that he was hardly listening to what I was saying. He was engrossed in his own thoughts. I stopped.

That brought Kramov out of his reverie.

"Well, Andrei," he remarked in a very distant tone, "I understand how you feel. I was twenty once myself and I used to walk with the girls along the Moscow embankment. As for your doubts, they'll pass. Doubt is an inevitable companion of love, isn't it? Well, it's time I was off."

He gave me his hand. It was strangely cold.

"Sorry I kept you so long, Nikolai Nikolayevich," I said in a barely audible voice.

"Are you disappointed? Did you expect me to wax enthusiastic? I'll tell you what—you've made me feel old and lonely and a little sorry for myself. Young people are egoists. That's all! And now to bed."

He turned me round and gave me a slight prod in the back.

So we went our ways, Kramov to his car, I to the barracks. I walked blindly and felt my cheeks blazing. I had never before spoken to anyone of my love for Svetlana, to anyone but her, that is. And I had not made things fully clear to her either, I lacked the spirit to do

it. And now I had laid bare my heart, revealed my innermost secret to someone who was positively a stranger. A few minutes before it had seemed to me that I was doing the right thing. But now I was torn by doubts. I felt ashamed of my emotion, of my sentimentality. I was thoroughly dismayed.

It seemed to me suddenly that the ancient mountain before me had come alive, that it had heard me and that deep in its stony heart it was laughing at me.

As I walked past Svetlana's room I noticed that the blind was drawn. That meant that Svetlana had gone to bed.

I dropped down on a boulder. A cold breeze fanned my face.

I sat in the white northern night amidst the mountains, their summits glowing a delicate pink.

8

Kramov was racing ahead, pushing into the mountains as impetuously and inexorably as a tank.

On our sector we were almost carrying out our tunnelling plan, but Kramov was systematically overfilling his.

At first this was not held against me. After all, Kramov had started tunnelling a little earlier, he was an engineer of experience while I was still looked upon as a young specialist. I was spared.

But it was clear to me that sooner or later the head office would stop making allowances: work is work, a tunnel is not an educational establishment, its interests come first. Much praise went to Kramov. He had already been commended once by the central board and twice by the managing director for speed of excavation.

But it was not fear of being censured by the works, not the commendations showered on Kramov that wor-

ried me, but a sense of my own helplessness. As an engineer I was a failure. How else was the lag in our work to be explained? The conditions were the same on both sectors: the same hard rock, the same equipment and personnel.

Yet the western sector was getting farther ahead of us every day.

Kramov looked thin and haggard. Those blue eyes of his had lost their calm look, and now had a strange glint of anxiety in them. It was clear that the speed at which he was driving ahead was a great strain for him.

His visits grew less frequent, though once a week he was sure to turn up at our sector.

On more than one occasion I discussed with him what could be the reasons for our lagging behind. Kramov never seemed to make a secret of his knowledge and replied willingly to all my questions of a technical nature. He would cheer me up and end by telling me, "Don't worry, Andrei, you'll get into the swing all right. Remember that's your first tunnel, but for me it's— Everything'll be all right."

Only once when I said in despair, "I'm the only one to blame, Nikolai Nikolayevich, I haven't the head for it," Kramov replied with irony:

"It's not always a question of the head, my lad. A good deal depends on the hands, too."

And he clenched his fists.

Soon an unexpected thing happened. When the dispatcher at the works gave us the usual weekly results the figures showed a sharp drop in Kramov's rate of tunnelling.

Kramov's brief comment was:

"We'll make it up!"

A few days later the rate-fixer arrived at our sector to check the quotas that had been established by Svetlana and myself at the outset of the tunnelling.

He was a taciturn middle-aged man. For two shifts he sat at the face with a stop-watch in his hand observing the work of the drillers, the loaders and the sappers; then he spent several hours in the office working with a slide-rule and an abacus. Finally he handed me the quotas neatly written out on a sheet of paper. They were much the same as those we had set ourselves previously. As he gave me his calculations the rate-fixer remarked:

"Well, things are going better here than on the western sector. They've got themselves into some mess over there."

I got all the information I could out of him about the western sector.

"If they'd go on working according to their quotas they'd eat up the annual wage fund in six months," he said.

I was greatly puzzled by what he told me.

"You don't know it, young man, but the first days on a building job are what some folks call the 'golden days.' You have no rate-fixers, no book-keepers. You're your own boss."

Then I realized that Kramov, taking advantage of these "golden days," had fixed low quotas. And his workmen who earned high wages as a result, had not spared their efforts. But now that fair quotas had been introduced, his speed had slowed down at once.

This was a staggering discovery. How simple it all was! So the point was not that I was a poor organizer or that Kramov possessed some secret recipe for dealing with his workmen. Everything was so much simpler and—cruder.

I set out for the works to find out why the management allowed a difference in quotas for workers on the same job.

But on the way I had an encounter which set my mind working in a different direction.

Passing by the notorious "washer" I saw a drunken lad come reeling out of the door. There was nothing unusual about this: people drank heavily in these parts. But the lad looked familiar, though I could not recollect where I had seen him before. He wore dirty rubber boots and his overalls were torn at the elbows. When I caught up with him I recognized him.

"Zaitsev," I called.

The lad stopped and turned a pair of bleary eyes on me.

Beyond a doubt it was Zaitsev, the very same lad who had come to Kramov to ask for a job. The change in him was horrible. He had been a bright, perky-looking lad. Now I saw before me a shabby, dishevelled fellow with a dull face.

"What's wrong, Zaitsev? Why are you in this state?"

"What state?" he asked defiantly, a slight sneer on his chapped lips. He hadn't recognized me.

"We've met before," I went on insistently, blocking the lad's way. "D'you remember coming and asking Kramov for a job? 'I want work on a new construction job. I want to learn,' you said. Remember?"

An elusive expression flashed across Zaitsev's resentful, suspicious face.

"I remember. So what?"

The question was point-blank and it caught me unawares. All the same I tried to keep up the conversation.

"How are things with you? What's your job like?"

He answered with an oath.

But I was not going to leave him like that.

"Listen," I said, "what's happened to you? You were a lad like any other. Are you working with Kramov now?"

Zaitsev tried to push me aside with a sharp jerk of his shoulder, but then he seemed to change his mind, for he narrowed his eyes and said:

“Want to talk to me? All right, but first treat me to a glass of vodka in the ‘washer.’ ”

It may not have been the best thing to do, yet I stepped into the “washer” with Zaitsev. I saw that it was the only way of getting him to talk.

Why did I have to do that? What did I want with Zaitsev? I don’t know. It must have been that I was deeply shocked by the sudden change in him.

We spent about an hour in the “washer,” and I was in low spirits when we parted. In spite of Kramov’s promise Zaitsev was still an unskilled labourer. He’d been put on unskilled work temporarily and then forgotten.

There was nothing out of the ordinary in that. Labourers are needed on all construction jobs. But what shocked me was the effect it had had on him.

When you hear that somebody you know has died your reaction is quite different from what it would be if you had yourself seen that person die. The comparison may not be very apt, but there is some justification for it. I felt that I was in some way responsible for the lad. I recalled his words: “I want to learn something.” He had had an ambition in life, that lad!

And now something had snapped in him. I knew I must help him somehow and persuaded the lad to come to see me the next day on my sector. I couldn’t make up my mind on the spot what job to offer him, but I knew I wasn’t going to leave Zaitsev in that state.

It was late—I had lingered too long with Zaitsev—and so when I got to the works I found no one from the management there.

I returned to my sector. Svetlana was already in bed.

In the morning I was awakened by a tap on the window. I stuck my head out and to my surprise there was Zaitsev.

He was wearing clean overalls. His rumpled face bore some traces of yesterday's liquor but he had put on a brave air. I came out and told him that I had not expected him so soon and had not yet managed to look round for a suitable job for him.

"Oh, I didn't come for that," said Zaitsev. "I've been promoted already."

I was completely taken aback. How could that have happened overnight?

But it had.

After leaving me Zaitsev had returned to his sector. The talk he had with me had stirred him up. Fuming with anger he had burst into Kramov's room and demanded to be transferred to a different job.

Kramov had replied rudely and ordered him out of his room and out of the sector if he liked. Then Zaitsev told Kramov that he had seen me and that I had promised him a job on the eastern sector.

At that, if I am to believe Zaitsev, Kramov's manner changed completely. He smiled, patted Zaitsev on the shoulder and said that no one, not even me, his best friend, was going to entice workers away from him. And there and then he had told the lad that he could arrange for him to train to be a driver. He summoned the lorry driver and gave him instructions to train Zaitsev so that he could take a test for his driving licence within three months.

For some reason Zaitsev's story made an unpleasant impression on me. Why had Kramov shown such haste? However, Zaitsev was happy. So was I. I wished him luck and we parted.

But I didn't put Zaitsev out of my mind. I had my own plans with regard to him and decided to talk them over with Svetlana.

She listened to my story without much interest. But when I gave an account of Zaitsev's talk with Kramov Svetlana suddenly pricked up her ears. Something seemed to kindle within her and she exclaimed:

"Of course, we must do something for the boy. But what?"

I suggested that we should help Zaitsev prepare for the entrance examinations to the mining school.

"We could coach him in maths and Russian," I suggested tentatively.

Svetlana gladly agreed. True, a minute later she asked with a shade of doubt in her voice:

"But Zaitsev lives eight kilometres away, doesn't he?"

"He'll come over here twice a week."

"That means sixteen kilometres a day!"

"He'll do it."

Soon afterwards I told Svetlana the story of Kramov's trick quotas. To my astonishment she was glad to hear about it, as though it were pleasant news and had resolved some of the doubts in her mind.

She gave me a peck on the forehead, rumbled my hair, and said gaily:

"You see? And you were making an idol of that Kramov of yours."

9

With great eagerness I waited for the next weekly report. The western sector now had the same quotas as ourselves. I was assured at the works that there were no complaints against me and was told that Kramov had been reprimanded for his arbitrary lower-

ing of quotas. Now both sectors were on the same footing.

And then, out of the blue, came the blow. The Saturday report showed that the western sector, which the week before had been thirty per cent behind us, was again forging ahead and had outstripped us by 2.3 metres.

I felt utterly dejected. Obviously, it was useless to try to compete with Kramov. He was a splendid engineer and a talented organizer. The thing to do was to learn from him, learn humbly and patiently, for a long time yet.

But though I came to this bitter conclusion my attitude towards Kramov was slowly and imperceptibly changing. But why, why? I noticed now that I was no longer as eager as I used to be to run with my joys and troubles to him.

Sometimes it seemed to me that the reasons for my changed attitude to Kramov were base. Perhaps envy was at the bottom of it all?

No, there was no envy for Kramov in my heart. I even forgave him the trick he had played with the quotas. It was dissatisfaction with myself, even despair at times, and a desire to get to the bottom of Kramov's successes, but envy—no, I am certain it wasn't that.

I tried to pull myself together. I worked two shifts running at the face, trying to discover why we were lagging behind. I got the workmen together. I analyzed the results of each shift, and finally, at the end of my tether, I went to Trifonov.

Incidentally, I must explain who Trifonov was.

It was perhaps during our second month of work that a rather thin, slow-moving middle-aged man wearing a short rough tweed coat arrived on our sector. He

handed me his papers, from which I learned that Pavel Kharitonovich Trifonov had been appointed to our sector as a shift foreman.

To be quite honest, I was both glad and disappointed, glad because there would now be somebody to take charge of a shift which had till then remained without competent supervision, and disappointed because Trifonov was not an engineer. I had applied to the works for an engineer. Trifonov obviously guessed my disappointment.

"They told me you had asked for an engineer," he said. "And you were right, the shift needs an engineer in charge. But you'll have to wait, they can't find you an engineer for the time being."

A faint smile crossed his face and there was something about him that made my heart go out to him at once. Perhaps it was his rather old-fashioned overcoat, which looked to me to be the type that was only worn by foremen in the old days, perhaps his neatly knotted tie, the whiteness of his shirt, so unusual for these parts, or his cultured speech, that appealed to me.

He interested me and again I drew some conclusions of my own. I imagined him to be of the old technical intelligentsia, thought he might once have been arrested, perhaps had even been implicated in the case of engineers charged with subversion, had served his term and had been rehabilitated.

I learned later that Trifonov was an old St. Petersburg worker. In response to an appeal made by Kirov more than twenty years before to go and conquer the Far North he had come to these parts and had worked here ever since. I also learned that he had been a member of the Communist Party since 1918.

I had a feeling of deep admiration for veteran Bolsheviks since childhood. An old lady who had been

a member of the Communist Party since 1903 used to live on our landing in Moscow. I knew very little about her, for we moved from that house when I was seven. All I remember is that her name was Anna Akimovna and that everyone in our family always spoke of her with deep respect.

As I grew older I added considerably to the picture I had of Anna Akimovna in my memory. I felt sure that she had been in all the places of exile in tsarist times, had taken part in three revolutions, and had ready replies to all of life's questions.

And here was a man on our sector who had been in the Party since 1918. Right at the outset I expected to see him do something big, something important and striking. But Trifonov did none of these things. He quietly occupied his place in the barracks, unpacked his things, and, once he had changed into overalls, immediately became a typical miner in no way different from our other workmen.

He was an experienced foreman. This I realized from the very beginning as I watched him supervise the drilling on his shift.

But very soon Trifonov asserted himself—in quite unexpected circumstances which, moreover, were connected with Svetlana and Agafonov.

Fyodor Agafonov, one of the two drillers who had been trying to break the rock with crowbars when I first turned up at the sector, was a glum and taciturn fellow. His deeply lined face had a permanent film of rock-dust and he walked with that stoop which is common among old miners, his head slightly sunk into his shoulders.

An old inhabitant of these parts, Agafonov had worked back in the thirties in the apatite mines. Later he had been in the nickel mines and then somewhere else. He didn't get on with Svetlana. Ever since that day

when, left in charge of the sector, Svetlana had lost her head and ordered the drillers to stop work, Agafo-
nov had disliked her. If she told him to do something
he hardly ever replied, or if he said anything it was no
more than a monosyllable.

Svetlana, who couldn't stand being slighted by any-
one, went out of her way to win Agafonov's favour.

She showered her attentions on him, praised his skill
and knowledge, asked for his advice even when she
could manage quite well without it.

Once she even succeeded in persuading Agafonov to
have tea with her. Agafonov drank one glass, uttering
no more than two or three words during the time he
spent with her. I made fun of Svetlana.

"What d'you want with him? The man is unsociable.
Leave him in peace. He's a first-rate miner and that's
quite enough."

But Svetlana would not give up. She literally stormed
Agafonov, trying to discover the reasons for his
reserve and aloofness. And at last the old fortress fell.
One sunlit arctic night Agafonov admitted to Svetlana
that he regretted things he had done in the past and
that the future filled him with fear and anxiety.

That night Svetlana learned a great deal about the
old miner. It appeared that more than twenty years
before Fyodor Agafonov, still a young man, had in his
eagerness for freedom deserted the wife to whom he had
been married for a few years. From then on he had been
a lonely and homeless wanderer.

At first the rough-and-ready existence had had its
attractions for him—the tough but carefree life in
barracks and tents pitched against the icy blast, and
the hard work in the mountains.

He told Svetlana of his experiences as a partisan
within the Arctic Circle during the war—that period
full of peril and hardship now seemed to him the hap-

piest in his life. But when the war ended he was past fifty and he lacked the energy to start a new life and support a new family; a lonely, homeless old age was now all he could see before him.

And so Agafonov began to think of Lyuba, his former wife, whom he had abandoned so long ago. Every day his desire to know what had happened to her grew stronger and keener until finally it became an obsession.

He knew nothing about her, not even whether she was dead or alive, whether she had remarried or remained single. He had not heard of her since the day he had left her in a small town in Central Russia.

But Agafonov had not told Svetlana the whole truth. The whole truth was that perhaps without quite realizing it, he longed to return to his wife and finish with his bachelor existence. His reason told him how extremely difficult, even impossible that would be. Still that hope kept him alive, he cherished it, though he knew he would never undertake a search for his wife. Meanwhile he was changing—growing more and more taciturn and sullen.

Svetlana now knew everything. And knowing it all she took it into her head that she must find the long-lost wife and reunite her and Agafonov.

She applied herself to this task with the same persistence she had used to break down Agafonov's reserve. When Svetlana confided her plans to me I told her that though they were romantic they were a trifle risky: how could she with so little knowledge of the characters of these two people try to reunite them?

But what I said made no impression on Svetlana. On the following Sunday she went to the settlement and sent a telegram to the registrar in Agafonov's home town asking for the address of Lyubov Dmitrievna Agafonova, née Koroteyeva. Four days later the reply

came: there was no one of that name living in the town.

Svetlana did not give up, she sent an air-mail letter to the town Party Committee. Correctly assuming that the Secretary would not fail to give attention to a matter which concerned human lives she cleverly implied in the letter that the fate of a former partisan and his wife was at stake.

The reply came in ten days. The Secretary of the committee informed her that inquiries had been made and it had been established that the woman in question had been a resident of the town until the outbreak of the war and had later been evacuated to the Urals, apparently to the Sverdlovsk Region. Beyond that nothing was known. The letter closed with a suggestion that Svetlana make inquiries of the Sverdlovsk Regional Party Committee.

Each setback only made Svetlana more determined. She started a correspondence with the Sverdlovsk Regional Party Committee and the regional militia. She wrote to people who had known the Agafonovs in the thirties—she got their names from Fyodor Agafonov.

The miner no longer turned his back on Svetlana when they met but looked at her with eyes full of hope and expectation.

Finally Svetlana got somewhere. A letter arrived from the Sverdlovsk regional militia informing her that Lyubov Dmitrievna Anosova, née Koroteyeva, Agafonova by her former husband, aged forty-six, was living in the town of Yelsk, Sverdlovsk Region, with her husband, a retired major named Anosov. Her full address followed.

With this letter Svetlana rushed to find Agafonov.

I had just gone into the barracks to tell Trifonov about the quotas when in dashed Svetlana waving the

letter. Agafonov had not yet returned from work and in her joy Svetlana said to me:

"There's a letter! Agafonov's wife's been found!"

Trifonov turned to Svetlana and said in a calm but peremptory tone:

"Give it to me!"

I had never noticed that Trifonov and Agafonov were on any special terms of friendship and thought that the shift foreman was quite indifferent to Agafonov's private affairs. His sharp tone surprised me.

"Why should I give it to you?" she asked in sudden embarrassment.

"Give me that letter!" said Trifonov.

His tone brooked no disobedience.

Svetlana meekly handed the letter to him. Slowly he took it out of the envelope, read it carefully, put it back in the envelope and returned it to Svetlana.

"Why did you start this business, Comrade Odintsova?" asked Trifonov, looking Svetlana straight in the eyes. "Do you think a human being is a plaything?"

A deep red suffused Svetlana's cheeks.

"How can you talk that way?" she said, agitated. "You—you don't know anything about them."

"I do know. Agafonov lives here side by side with me. What d'you want of him?"

"I want him to be happy!" said Svetlana. "Have I no right to want that? Must I ask your permission to be kind to someone?"

Her tone grew louder, more self-assured, as though she were trying to convince herself that she was right.

"Wait a moment," said Trifonov with sudden gentleness. "You say, 'be kind to someone.' When you are being kind you must act seriously and with forethought. Tossing a coin to a beggar is also being kind."

But what is such kindness worth? You toss him the coin and forget about him."

"Why do you say things like that?" asked Svetlana sharply. "Beggars, coins? What have beggars to do with this?"

"What I mean is that there are various ways of being kind," Trifonov continued in the same even tone. "Agafonov and his former wife haven't seen each other for years. They have led different lives. She's married a retired major. What right have you to meddle in their lives and what will it lead to?"

"But the man's suffering."

"Don't be a hypocrite!" Trifonov said with sudden severity. "Have you thought of her? Of the major? Your interest in the whole matter is purely superficial—the search itself, the inquiries, the letters arriving—'How interesting it's all turning out!' You've set the ball rolling and just look what's happening. What is Lyubov Anosova to you? Or the major? Or Agafonov, for that matter? Are they human beings or puppets?"

I watched the scene in silence. It was all so unexpected: the fact that Trifonov knew about Svetlana's letters of inquiry, his manner with her, Svetlana's embarrassment. Svetlana soon left us with tearful eyes, looking to me very much like a child deprived of a favourite toy.

All the same, I felt sorry for Svetlana, and hurt on her account.

"You were too hard on her, Pavel Kharitonovich," I said.

"Do you really think so, Andrei?" asked Trifonov with unexpected familiarity.

That day Kramov came over to see us. I don't remember what brought him—I think it was to borrow some compressor air tubing. As usual he stayed on till evening.

This time Svetlana was quite amiably disposed towards him and he kept teasing her by addressing her as "school-ma'am" because of the help she was giving Zaitsev with his studies. He was lively and joking and I was happy to see Svetlana's spirits revive after the unpleasant scene with Trifonov.

But on the following day Svetlana sank into a sort of torpor. I had often noticed that Kramov's visits worked a change in her: she became irritable or immersed herself in her work with redoubled energy, spending two shifts running at the face, or was excessively affectionate and loving towards me, or she ignored me altogether.

At first I did not pay any attention to this. It was perhaps after the last meeting with Kramov that I saw the preceding ones in a new light and realized how they affected Svetlana's moods.

After that last meeting Svetlana looked dejected and weary. She left for work that morning in grubby overalls, the first time I had ever known her to do such a thing. I had the feeling that she had even forgotten to wash.

Some days passed. And then, quite by chance, I discovered that for almost a fortnight Svetlana had neglected to give Zaitsev his lessons. At my maths lesson I told Zaitsev that he had mispronounced a number of words and that he ought to read more. From his reply I learned that Svetlana had stopped giving him his Russian lessons.

"Why didn't you tell me this before?" I asked.

Zaitsev looked embarrassed.

"Oh, I suppose she's too busy."

I felt vexed and disappointed. I hurried to the face and found Svetlana.

"Why have you stopped giving Zaitsev lessons?"

"I've only missed a lesson or two," she replied calmly, ignoring my irritation.

"Once you've started, you should go on."

"And why, tell me, are you so annoyed?"

"Because Zaitsev has to take his entrance exams," I replied, "and because they mean so much to his future. You're ruining his chances. It's your business to get him to spend more time reading and writing." Svetlana did not answer.

I felt I had spoken rudely and went on in a milder tone:

"We agreed to help, Svetlana. We've got to keep our word. Kramov's fooled him once. Surely we don't want to do the same."

Again Svetlana did not answer. But that evening she went to the barracks where Zaitsev sat waiting for her. I decided to see how the lesson was going but in a way that would embarrass neither pupil nor teacher. So I stood in the dimly lit entrance hall.

Zaitsev was sitting at the window looking at a sheet of paper when Svetlana entered.

"Well, let's go on with our lessons," said Svetlana.

There was no drawer in the table and Zaitsev began to crumple up the sheet of paper in his hand, not knowing where to put it.

"What are you hiding there? A letter?" Svetlana asked.

"It's nothing..." muttered Zaitsev and blushed a deep red.

"Show it to me," Svetlana said and playfully caught his hand under the table.

Finally she wrested the crumpled sheet out of Zaitsev's grip and smoothed it out.

"Don't read it, give it back to me," Zaitsev muttered, but did not get up from his seat.

Svetlana read out loud:

*Life is dull in these parts,
With the wind whistling,
All around the snow lies thick.
The view is bleak.
If only I could study
I'd go off there
Where people live happily
Where towns hum.
When I came here
I thought life'd be good
But it is all a lie.*

"So you're a poet," said Svetlana rather scornfully. "Only your meter and rhyme leave much to be desired. How long have you been writing verse?"

"I don't write verse," replied Zaitsev, avoiding her eyes. "I just play around with words. That's not poetry."

"I'm glad you realize it isn't. Still, if you've got an urge to write no one will stop you. But to learn to write real poetry you've got to read more."

"And what shall I read?" Zaitsev asked.

"Well, just read good books, good literature."

"I do read. I read a book the other day."

"About what?"

"About beautiful love," said Zaitsev with unexpected bitterness. "I'll better tell you about myself. I spend eight hours a day in the tunnel. I'm always dirty, there's no shower. I've a new suit lying wrinkled in my suitcase. There's no place to iron it. What would I want with it, anyway? Wear it to the 'washer'? No one cares what you wear there. All the time I wear my padded coat. There are no girls here. Plenty of them at the mining settlement, looking just as grimy and messy

as we do. A girl finishes work and she's got to go shopping or do her washing. Talk about love and beautiful love at that!"

Svetlana did not answer.

"I'm going to go to the mining school," Zaitsev went on dreamily, "and learn a trade. That's when I'll look for a job in a place where life's good. I'm fed up with this."

For some time Svetlana remained silent. It seemed to me that she wanted to say something but either hesitated or could not find the right words.

"We had better get on with the lesson," she said.

10

We were still suffering the same hardships—barracks, hard bunks, half-cold food. To wash we had to go to the lake. And we had no recreation of any kind.

But we had the tunnel and it occupied all our thoughts and every bit of our time.

Somehow our discomforts had previously seemed to me all part of the life in the Far North and they had not bothered me much.

But after hearing Zaitsev's conversation with Svetlana, the life we were leading appeared in quite a different light to me.

Zaitsev was right, I told myself. After all, work alone cannot fill up a man's life, he wants some privacy, he wants to read books, to meet his friends, go to the pictures and to the theatre. Why, then, had I done nothing to improve our difficult life and break its dull monotony?

My thoughts turned to Svetlana. If Zaitsev found the conditions hard, then how could Svetlana stand them? I understood now why she had been so indifferent to

everything of late, even neglecting her looks, why she was losing confidence in herself and having bouts of irritability.

The life we were leading was telling on her. She was finding it difficult, moreover, because she was used to the comforts of city life, to Moscow, because she was quite on her own here, without girl friends, and because she was a woman.

According to the plan, it would take us another year to complete the tunnel. And I was determined that during that year we should live like human beings. The thing to do was to put up some decent dwellings, though they were not provided for in the plan. I went to Kramov for advice, thinking that we could raise the matter together.

Kramov refused, saying that if we had been founding a permanent industry it would be to the interests of the state to build not just one or two dwellings but a whole township. But we would be working in the place for no more than another year. The main job was to finish the tunnel. Building dwellings would only divert efforts and attention from it.

I disagreed with him and told him that I would raise the question on my own.

I went to the works and saw Falaleyev. He replied:

"Don't be too smart, Arefyev. Better watch the work, you're behind again."

I said:

"When the workers' conditions improve, their speed of work will improve too."

"Don't be too smart," Falaleyev repeated. "Look at Kramov and learn! He's forging ahead, he works fast, and never asks for anything."

After a moment's thought he added:

"If you want to build a place for yourself, I'll let you have some timber."

I went out, slamming the door behind me.

I got more attention from the managing director. But this is what he said:

“Look here, Arefyev, have you any idea what an estimate is? What a plan is? Where am I going to get the money, the labour, the building materials?”

I told him that we wouldn't need many hands, we'd manage with our own workers. They were not likely to refuse to build living quarters for themselves after working hours.

The managing director was annoyed at what he called my “ignorance of business.” Couldn't I understand that it was not possible to arrange such matters once the plan and the estimate had been fixed and the building begun? And did I think that they would be permitted to draw funds as they pleased from the state purse?

He leaned over his desk with its telephones and microphones, spreading his hands and resting them on the edge of the desk.

In that attitude he looked like a cashier guarding the state funds from my would-be inroads into them. This made me completely lose my temper.

“Plans! Estimates!” I cried. “I know all about them. But don't you realize that people can't live the way they're living now!”

The matter seemed so plain to me, my demand so just, that I looked upon any objections as red tape pure and simple.

“But they've been living that way till now, haven't they?” the managing director demurred.

“Till now!” I cried. “Who wants people to live the way they've been living till now?”

We had more hot words and I returned to my sector without gaining a thing.

That evening our living quarters looked especially dirty, drab and uncomfortable to me.

I told Trifonov about my talk at the works.

"Go to the Regional Party Committee," Trifonov advised.

I decided to talk matters over with Svetlana first. It was quite late when I found her in her room. She was lying on her bed with her overalls and boots on, and her hands were folded behind her head.

She sat up hastily, brushing the rock-dust off the bedspread.

"Life here is pretty bad, Svetlana," I said. "Look how the workers spend their days. They've nothing but their bunks and the rock-face. On Sundays they go to the 'washer.' They eat half-cold meals delivered from the works' canteen. Don't you agree with me?"

"But Kramov's workers live in worse conditions, they haven't even enough bed linen to go round there. Yet they work faster than ours," Svetlana replied.

"I'm not interested in Kramov now, I'm speaking of the sector I'm in charge of. We've got to change it all, Svetlana. We're not worth a kopek unless we create decent, just decent living conditions for our workmen."

I told Svetlana of my plan to build dwellings, of my visit to the works, and of Trifonov's advice to go to the Regional Party Committee.

"Don't go, Andrei," urged Svetlana, lightly touching my hand.

"Why? Don't you think I'm right?"

"Oh, everyone's right!" Svetlana said wearily. "We live badly, I agree with you. But the people at the works are right too. They have their plan and estimate. Put yourself in their position."

"I don't care a hang for their position!" I cried, losing my temper. "And there can be no position in which everyone is equally right. There's only one truth."

"Listen, Andrei," said Svetlana gently, her fingers tightening round my hand, "let's be frank about this.

Who are you? An engineer with less than a year's experience, only just fulfilling your plan. What have you got to show for yourself, what weight have you when you go to the Regional Party Committee? You'll fall out completely with Falaleyev now and you'll have a row with the managing director. What backing will you have when you go to the Committee?"

"The truth."

"Mere words," she commented with a bitter smile. "You've just said that there can be no two truths. Well, listen to me. We came up North because we wanted to tackle a job that would be tough and difficult. And here we are cutting a tunnel—we've achieved something. That's one truth for you, the superficial truth, the truth they like to write about in the newspapers. Everything is clear, correct; on the surface we are idealist young specialists, heroes of the age. Actually, inside us, things are not so clear and simple as all that. You know yourself deep in your heart that I have changed, that I crave for something different, I don't quite know what. That too is the truth. Sometimes, Andrei, I'm afraid of you and that, too, is the truth. . . . At times I wait impatiently for Kramov to come, whereas before I disliked him intensely. I don't know why I should look forward to his coming like that. Don't think I'm in love with him. I'm not, not in the least. Yet I look forward to his visits. And I know if the way I used to feel is the truth and I'm the same girl I used to be, then I ought not to be looking forward to them at all. And yet I do and that's the truth, too."

Before I could answer Svetlana I thought hard for a long time. I couldn't understand, couldn't piece things together, so strange did her words sound to me. The meaning behind them filled me with dread. Her last words concerned Kramov and so did my reply, but it was

what she had said earlier about what I had to show for myself, what backing I had, that rang in my mind.

“Well, go on looking forward to his visits then!” I said harshly and bitterly. “He’ll explain everything to you. Apparently he, too, recognizes two truths like you—to suit the circumstances. He’s got backing and weight. But *he* won’t go to the Committee. Not if you argue with him for days, he won’t do it, not for the life of him. Go ahead, look forward to his coming. I wonder what sort of truth he’ll bring you this time. He has a choice of them—just like you. But I’m going to the Regional Committee with the one truth I have, which is all I need.”

Next day I went to Zapolyarsk. I arrived in the evening, with difficulty managed to get a bed in the same old hotel and in the morning went to the offices of the Party Committee.

There I was sent to the instructor of the Industrial Department, a bullet-headed fellow with extremely calm eyes that had a glassy stare. He was that vague, even-tempered type one meets now and then.

I told him at length about the conditions under which we worked. He listened intently, but made no comment. His face expressed nothing but that studied calm. To talk with such a person is extremely unpleasant. At our Institute we had various types of professors. During examinations you went before one and you felt there was a living person in front of you. He would not help you in any way but you knew that he was interested, the expression in his eyes changing imperceptibly when you answered correctly. But there were others who regarded you with the same dispassionate politeness whether you made a good showing or floundered.

The instructor was the polite dispassionate type.

I asked him, "Surely Soviet people can't be allowed to live like that?" But he maintained his silent composure.

At length I understood that his main concern was to retain that dispassionate calm. Not only did he have no intention of expressing an opinion but he intimated in every way that he would never commit himself.

Seething with rage I began to plan a sort of game. Yes, a game whereby I hoped somehow or other to make the instructor express an opinion.

However, he proved more than a match for me. Only once did I succeed in scoring a point. It was when I mentioned that the workmen had no place to gather and read books or magazines. For that reason, I explained it was impossible to conduct political studies. That made him frown slightly.

"You must organize political studies," he said.

I succeeded in getting no more out of him than that.

Curious enough, a month later I met that very same instructor in our settlement. He had been transferred to the District Party Committee. The fellow had had no luck. We got talking and he told me that for many years he had worked at the Central Committee as an instructor, then six months before we met he had been transferred to the Regional Committee and now he has been demoted to district work. This time I found him quite a different person; it was as though somebody had taken him by the shoulders and shaken him with such energy that his crust of dispassionate calm had fallen off to reveal a normal, living person underneath.

And so my talk at the Regional Committee with that instructor brought no results.

The instructor even refused to report my request to his superiors, saying that the Regional Committee did

not deal with economic matters and that I had better apply to the Regional Executive Committee.

But with all my heart I felt that this was a Party matter with far more than economic implications.

There was something else that urged me to have the matter settled by the Party and that was, strange as it may seem, the behaviour of the instructor.

I went in search of the Secretary of the Regional Party Committee.

I discovered that it was difficult, if not impossible, to get to him.

The technical secretary on duty sent me to the assistant secretary of the Committee, whom I saw in a little office next to the reception room. After listening to my business he told me that my way of raising the question smacked of "guerrilla tactics."

"Just imagine," he said, "what would happen if everybody went to the Secretary of the Regional Party Committee with such matters. The region is big, it has plenty of construction sites and a fishing industry as well."

Everything he was saying was quite clear and elementary. Yet he did not in the least convince me. There were things I could not explain to him: that the question of building living quarters for the workers was somehow connected in my mind with many things, that I was making a stand against Kramov and his attitude towards people, that I was fighting for Svetlana!

At the end of our talk the assistant secretary said:

"I'll tell you what—I'll phone the assistant secretary of the Executive Committee and have the matter looked into over there."

He reached for the telephone.

"You needn't bother!" I said firmly, and left the room.

As I was passing through the empty reception-room, a high, oilskin-upholstered door opened and a man came out of the Secretary's office. The secretary on duty was not in the reception-room, and something seemed to urge me on. I changed course and slipped through the still open door of the Secretary's office.

I had never before been in the office of an important official and I felt a little lost.

But then curiosity got the better of me and I looked around. I felt my feet sinking into the thick soft carpet. I saw a map that took up practically half a wall, a massive desk, a telephone switchboard gleaming with black varnish and looking like the keyboard of a huge typewriter, and a long conference table.

This table did not stand against the desk to form a "T" as is usual in such offices. It stood on its own. It was covered, though not completely, with green baize. At its far end, where its polished edge projected, forming as it were a smaller table, a man sat bent over his papers.

I had not noticed him at first. When I entered all I saw was the big desk, and so I decided that the office was empty and that the man I had just seen leave was the Party Secretary himself.

Then I realized my mistake.

"Comrade Secretary," I said in a low voice.

The man looked up. He had a lined face and bushy eyebrows, which he raised slightly as he saw me.

I walked across to the table and hastily explained what had brought me to him, apologizing for bursting in without an appointment.

The Secretary listened to me in silence.

"Sit down!"

That single phrase so heartened me that I decided I had already won my case.

I hurriedly sat down on one of the chairs that stood in a long row at the table and began to state my case with fresh ardour.

The Secretary interrupted me to ask:

“Are you a Party member, Comrade—?”

“Arefyev,” I prompted, adding, “I’ve been a candidate member since last year.”

“Well, Comrade Arefyev,” the Secretary said sternly, “both my assistant and the instructor were right in advising you to apply to the Regional Executive Committee and you are wrong to complain to me about them.”

He stopped. My high spirits evaporated instantly. It was as though I had been abruptly checked in a forward run. His tone and the formal manner in which he referred to the Regional Executive Committee—in full instead of using the customary abbreviation—only emphasized the severity of his words.

“I want you to understand,” the Secretary continued calmly, “that your problem is a routine economic matter, though I admit an important one. Similar problems arise very often in our work. What would happen if their solution depended not on a detailed study of them by people who have been entrusted with this task by the Party and Government but on whether Comrade Arefyev had or had not spoken to the Secretary of the Regional Committee about it?”

There was something crushing in his words.

I no longer sensed severity in his voice but rather a certain aloofness. It seemed to me that his thoughts just then were somewhere very far away, that he was merely submitting to some unavoidable necessity in telling me these elementary truths and thus carrying out his difficult but habitual duty.

I thought to myself that the instructor, the assistant secretary and finally the Secretary of the Regional

Committee had in fact given me the same answer but in different words. I was in despair.

"So there won't be any houses," I said in a low voice. "I have tried to raise the question in the proper quarter. I was at the works...."

"No need to lose heart," the Secretary said slowly, "a Communist must go on fighting if he knows himself to be in the right."

Now and then he glanced casually at the papers in front of him.

I was overcome with rage. I was no longer overawed by the atmosphere in the office—the carpet, the map, the curtains over the door, the telephones. All this in fact increased my irritation. I felt like shouting to the Secretary, "Come and spend some time in our barracks!"

But I controlled myself and said through clenched teeth:

"Fight, you say? Fight! For what? So that people may live like human beings? Can't that be decided without a fight? What I mean is this—surely it should not be necessary to expend energy, to argue, to try to convince people of a thing like that? And what if I fail to convince them? What if I stop fighting? What then?"

My voice rose. Gradually all my restraint melted away. The Secretary was no longer glancing at his papers. He was watching me, his heavy eyebrows twitching.

"If a man is taken ill in the street, if something happens to him," I went on, "surely it's everyone's duty to help him? Surely the need to help him is obvious? Do we have to fight for that? D'you think I don't understand all about plans, estimates, the need for organization? But here people are living in intolerable conditions—intolerable, d'you understand that? What is your plan and your estimate compared with that? I was

convinced that once honest people were told about it that would be enough for steps to be taken to remedy the situation. And now what? Am I to go back to my sector and see things stay as they were? And now you know what things are like you're not going to do anything about it. You'll—"

I choked, sprang to my feet and dashed out of the office. I believe I slammed the door. I was ready there and then to rush to the station, jump into the first train and go to Moscow, to the Central Committee. Then I cooled down a bit and decided to send a detailed letter instead.

In the train on my way back I kept composing that letter in my head. I visualized one of the secretaries of the Central Committee reading it, saw him bang his fist down on the table and ask for a call to be put through instantly to the Secretary of the Regional Party Committee, saw a light flash on on the varnished switchboard. Not for a moment did I doubt that that was what would happen. A month before I had read the Central Committee's decision on agriculture. And before that we had read other decisions which had filled us with joy and pride for our Party. We saw and knew that the Party was leaving no stone unturned to restore truth wherever it had been trampled on, that it was opening up new prospects before the whole of our land.

Later the thought crossed my mind that before my letter got to Moscow, before it was given due consideration and its contents checked, much time would pass. I knew full well that in those days thousands of letters from all parts of the country were pouring into the Central Committee's offices, for both Party members and non-Party members were now aware that the Central Committee was eager to know their opinions and to stimulate their personal initiative. Might not my letter from this small building job in the Far North,

which was only of local importance, get overlooked in this great spate?

Meanwhile things would remain as they were.

And there rose before me the image of Kramov, who apparently wanted nothing changed, who felt like a fish in water under the old conditions. I saw Svetlana, stunned and restless, and the stupid, obstinate Falaleyev.

I imagined the way they would meet me, knowing that I had gained nothing and had received no support for my plan. My spirits fell. I'm a little ashamed to relate what happened later but I must.

I returned to the settlement. It was Saturday. Walking past the "washer" and hearing the low hum of voices I felt an irresistible desire to forget all that had happened, if only for a while. I stepped into the "washer."

I went there firmly resolved to have no more than a mug of beer. But seeing that there were no workmen from my sector and being pressed by the men around me, I drank down a glass of vodka, then another....

Not to mince matters, I got drunk. Vaguely I recall Kramov's driver appearing and putting me in the front seat by his side.

I awoke in the night in Kramov's room with a splitting headache, no longer drunk but very thirsty.

In spite of the late hour Kramov was sitting at his table reading a book by the light of a lamp with a stiff paper shade.

"Can I have a drink of water, please?" I said.

Kramov turned to me and shut his book.

"Why aren't you sleeping?" he asked in a matter-of-fact voice as though my being in his room at that time of night was quite natural.

He rose, went out into the hall and returned with a metal mug in his hand.

I drank down the ice-cold water at a gulp. Kramov returned to his chair at the table. My head now ached less. I felt disgusted with myself and ashamed. Here I was lying on the very same bed on which I had spent my first night at the construction site. How cosy that room had seemed to me. And I had felt such great affection, friendship and devotion for Kramov. But now I loathed these walls, the presence of Kramov irritated me and I despised myself.

"They tell me you've been to Zapolyarsk?" Kramov asked.

"I have," I replied dully.

"About housing?"

"Yes."

"Well, what success?"

"There will be no houses," I replied, averting my gaze.

"I thought as much," Kramov said calmly, without a shade of malice. "You still haven't learned how important the estimate is in our economic system."

"I know now."

Kramov rose, paced the room for a while and sat down on the bed at my feet.

"Listen, Andrei," he said. "I'm afraid you're a poor judge of the people you work with. You think it's the same here as in other parts of the country. But this is the Arctic, don't you see?"

"People are people everywhere."

"No, the people here are different. Some of them are ex-kulaks exiled here during the collectivization period. Then there are their children. Again there are people who came here when the place was all tundra, with only a Lapp settlement here and there. In their time they worked really hard. But the incentive to work is gone for them now. They've been receiving all sorts of bonuses for their long years of service in the North. And

they'll go on receiving them regardless, you might say, of their labour productivity. Then there is still another category—those who have arrived here in recent years. They know only one incentive—money. Is that clear? And now I put it to you as a mature individual—did you consider all this when you started the fuss about new dwellings, cultural facilities and so on? Wouldn't it be better to take these people as they are and treat them accordingly in a simple and sober way, knowing what they're out for and what you want from them?"

"How shall I treat them? Tell me!" I asked quietly.

"Very well. The first category are people nursing a grudge. They need a special approach, you must be careful with them. People of the second category are those who have grown fat and lazy. They must be made to work—understand? As for the third category, you must give them the chance of making big money. It's no good unless you do that. That's all it amounts to."

"Tell me," I spoke in the same quiet voice, though I was fuming inside, "aren't there any ordinary people—just plain honest Soviet people—here?"

"Listen, Andrei," Kramov interrupted impatiently, "spare me your empty demagogic questions. I'm talking to you about the specific characteristics of the local labour force. D'you understand what I mean?"

"I understand," I told him. "But if you don't mind me saying so, Nikolai Nikolayevich, in your words I find a specific characteristic of your own—a peculiarly cold, callous and prejudiced approach to people."

"There you go again."

"Wait a minute," I said, sitting up. "You tell me that former kulaks came here. Maybe it's true. But a quarter of a century has passed since those days. Surely in that time many have by hard and honest work turned over a new leaf in life and have had all their civil rights restored years ago. Why, some of them have won

decorations, and yet you want to hold a whip over them."

"I didn't mean a whip, I meant vigilance," interrupted Kramov.

"Stop," I demanded. "You are abusing a great revolutionary word when you talk that way of vigilance. Be vigilant, but drop your whip! You've read of the amnesty—even those who committed grave crimes but who have atoned for their guilt have been pardoned. How about the children of these people? Many of them are barely twenty. They were born after their fathers had ceased to be kulaks. And you want to wield your whip over them too, to blackmail them with the sins of their fathers. Who will permit you to do this in our days?"

Extremely agitated, I jumped out of bed. Kramov rose too, then dropped on to the bed again.

"Come, let's stop this idle argument," he said placatingly and even somewhat guiltily. "I suppose you're right, after all. Human life is the most precious thing on earth. Especially in the Soviet Union."

I glanced at him in amazement. It seemed that he could not have uttered these words—they sounded so sincere and heartfelt. It was hard to believe that this and all he had said previously could have been spoken by one and the same person and with equal conviction.

Kramov looked straight at me with his calm, unwavering cornflower-blue eyes.

"Life has many facets, Andrei," he continued pensively and rather sadly. "Let's take army regulations, for example. In them everything seems right and reasonable. Yet in war you can't always act according to regulations. And we, Andrei, are not in the rear of the country here."

He kept talking, but I hardly listened. Strangely enough, Kramov's voice, his manner of speaking, his reasoning, which awhile ago had great power over me, now left me cold.

I wondered why he was saying all this. I sat down at the table and began to leaf through the book he had been reading. It was Maeterlinck's *Life of the Bee*.

"Our life is a struggle," Kramov went on, developing a line of thought the beginning of which I had missed, "and the means of reaching our great extremely humane goal are not always humane."

He stopped talking, and bowing his head, fell into a reverie. I said nothing, and soon noticed that he was watching me out of the corner of his eye.

And that very instant I saw through him, saw that the ponderous way in which he spoke was only a means of hiding his real thoughts from me.

"We don't see eye to eye," I said, rising abruptly.

Kramov also got up quickly. I went to the door.

"Where are you going?" Kramov asked, abashed and even somewhat alarmed.

"I'm leaving. I've got a headache. It won't let me sleep anyway."

"You must be mad!" he cried, barring my way to the door. "Are you going to leg it eight kilometres home? Wait, I'll drive you over in the morning."

"No need for that."

"All right, go," he flung at me, his tone changing astonishingly fast. He sounded sullen, even rude. "I'm not stopping you. But don't say too much about having had one over the eight. There are plenty of hypocrites this side of the Arctic Circle."

He stood back to let me pass.

11

Autumn came to the Arctic. The air was transparent and the distant peaks, once hidden from view, now stood out clearly, on the horizon.

The bogs, hardly noticeable in the sand, turned yellow,

the water in the lakes was blue and shrubs and lichen spread over the hollows.

The polar days were over and now darkness followed daylight as in other parts of the globe. Rain was frequent but it was not as depressing as in the towns or in the steppes, for each shower brought out fresh colours in the northern landscape.

As I walked I wondered if there could be two truths—a big one and a little one. One, the great general truth of important occasions and historic achievements, and the other, a little truth, the truth of everyday life, which so often contradicts the other truth. In the name of the big truth we build tunnels, so that people may not be endangered by landslides, so that valuable ores may reach their destination without delay, our ultimate aim being the good and the happiness of society.

Was that the aim that inspired Kramov? Was Svetlana motivated by such an aim? I proposed a simple measure to ease the lot of our tunnellers. And did they whose chief concern should be the welfare of others favour my proposal and help me put it into effect? No, they treated it with indifference, even hostility. How was I to reconcile these two truths? When I studied at the Institute, living according to “time-tables” and judging life outside college only from what I read in the newspapers, everything had seemed clear enough to me.

But perhaps the newspapers had misled me? After all, some of them presented things as follows: the Party issues a slogan, all the people are fired with enthusiasm, and everyone is unanimous in the desire to carry that slogan out. True, we were told, one comes across unreliable elements, but they are few and far between and their actions are of such little consequence that there is no need to take them into consideration at all.

Yet in reality everything was quite different.

I walked on, working myself up more and more, my indignation rising against those who were upsetting my notions of life.

On Sundays, especially in the early mornings, peace and quiet reigned over our sector. When I got there the first man I saw was Pavel Kharitonovich Trifonov.

He was shaving, perched on a boulder at the foot of the mountain and peering into a pocket mirror propped on a ledge of the rock.

I went up to him and snapped:

"There'll be no houses for us."

Trifonov went on shaving, stretching his cheek with his tongue. After carefully wiping his razor with a wisp of moss he asked calmly:

"Why not?"

I could no longer contain myself. I began to unburden myself, telling him what I thought of the instructor at the Regional Party Committee and the Secretary, of bureaucracy, of everything I had been turning over in my mind on my way back from Kramov's.

I couldn't tell whether Trifonov was listening or not. He went on quietly shaving, his eyes glued to the mirror.

After he had finished shaving, Trifonov carefully wiped his razor with moss again, put it back into its leather holder, washed the shaving-brush in the tin mug of water standing beside him on the boulder, rose and said with a smile:

"To hell with the bureaucrats, Comrade Arefyev. Let's forget them and take a stroll. Look what a fine day it is! By the way where did you spend the night? At the settlement?"

The last thing I wanted to do was to go for a walk. I hadn't given vent to half of what was boiling inside me. But Trifonov's last question had embarrassed me. It recalled to mind at once the previous evening spent at the "washer." I stole a cautious glance at Trifonov.

Surely that news hadn't reached the sector yet? Maybe one of our workmen had been there after all.

But Trifonov's face told me nothing. He was slowly passing his hand over his cheeks to see how smooth he had shaved himself.

"I slept over in the settlement at the works hostel," I muttered.

"Well, shall we go for a stroll?" he said. "I'll just put my things away."

Gathering up the mug, brush and mirror, he stepped into the barracks and was back again in a minute.

Trifonov's words and calm assured manner were hard to resist.

I went with him.

About two kilometres from the site there was a forest, which looked particularly beautiful from a distance. In the middle were trees gilded with the tints of autumn. Like tongues of flame they shot above the green mass of trees whose leaves had not yet completely turned: the glades were red like enormous bonfires.

"We were worrying about you here," Trifonov said, averting his gaze. "You promised to be back on Saturday evening."

"Who was worried? Svetlana?" The words escaped in spite of myself.

"Why only Svetlana? Several people asked about you. Agafonov, for one, and Zaitsev, the lad from the western sector."

I had somehow thought that the workers of our sector were not very interested in me and Trifonov's words cheered me up.

If only I could call the men together and tell them that I had got permission to have dwellings built and that in two or three months they would live like human beings. Instead I had to tell them that they would go on living in the same old way. Moreover, I had to think up explana-

tions of why there would be no dwellings, which meant in the long run repeating the Secretary's excuses, which I had thought so unjust.

My chagrin and disgust, the feelings which had subsided in me a short while ago rose again. And I poured out all my bitter thoughts to Trifonov.

"Take yourself, Pavel Kharitonovich, a veteran Communist, a worker, a representative of the ruling class," I said. "How could you allow red tape and complacency to take such deep root? Why didn't you put a stop to the spate of high-flown phrases with which all sorts of gasbags befuddled the people? The people's happiness should be the greatest concern of our leaders. And is it the greatest concern of such people as Kramov, the Secretary, the instructor, our Falaleyev? Do they make it their life's aim?"

I don't quite remember now what else I said. But I spoke hurriedly, eager to get it all off my chest. Finally I was silent. Trifonov too was silent. We skirted the lake, red from the rays of the rising sun; white clouds looking like little islands were reflected on its surface.

"You ask, Arefyev, what we were doing during those years?" Trifonov said slowly. "We were working all those years. We were working before you were born, men like your father and I, working so that you could grow up and study."

"That I know," I waved aside his words. "Everyone worked. But to what end?"

Trifonov halted abruptly and gave me a relentless stare. His calm eyes, surrounded by hosts of little wrinkles, took on an angry and piercing look. My last words had evidently stung him to the quick.

"What do you want from me?" he said. "We overthrew the tsar, we smashed the old world, we built factories, we bled to death in the war to save it all for you, everything

that had been won by us. And you've let a couple of bureaucrats obscure all this from your sight."

"I didn't mean to hurt you, Pavel Kharitonovich," I said. "But isn't the Party criticizing today much of what was done in the past?"

"It does criticize and rightly so!" exclaimed Trifonov. "All sorts of parasites and hangers-on have attached themselves to us, many wrong things have seeped into our life. But as for the great things that have been created by the people, the Party guards them like the apple of its eye. And that is something you dare not raise your voice against, do you hear that? There'll be many smart fellows speculating on Party criticism these days. We'll hear them shout, 'We're with the Party!' With it? No, they're alone in their kind of criticism. You mentioned the existence of two truths. You're wrong. There are no two truths in our land. There is one truth, a truth for which we gave the best years of our life, the truth that was and is. All your other truths are petty and vile—they're not truths but obstacles in our way."

I stood crushed, my eyes lowered. I was stunned not so much by Trifonov's words as by the way this man, generally imperturbable, even-tempered and methodical, had taken what I had said. This sudden outburst of anger, the strong feeling and conviction with which he had spoken surprised and embarrassed me.

Only a minute before it had seemed to me that I knew and understood everything, that I had through my own bitter experiences learned to see what others did not see. But now, standing before Trifonov, I suddenly saw myself through another's eyes as a small crowing cock.

Trifonov set off with me at his heels. We walked between heaps of grey stones dotted with green moss and resembling huge petrified toads.

Stunted birches spread their boughs over the rocks; in the crevices grew Iceland moss.

Our footsteps sent the bilberry leaves quivering lightly. The rising sun cast a slanting shadow across a mountain gorge over which a cloud was slowly drifting like a searchlight.

Trifonov sat down on a huge boulder on which the moss grew like thick plush. He drew a packet of cigarettes from his pocket and lit up.

"Let me have one, too," I said.

Trifonov handed the packet to me.

"I thought you didn't smoke," he commented, passing me a box of matches.

I made a despondent gesture. We sat for some time smoking in silence. I drew on the cigarette so hard that I soon smoked it to the butt. Then I threw it away and thought: What else can I do to avoid sitting here in silence? Suddenly Trifonov asked a question that took me utterly by surprise.

"When are you going to get married, Andrei?"

The blood rushed to my cheeks. Trifonov had asked the question in a very simple and natural way. I remembered that my late father had been in the habit of asking in just such a tone, the tone of an elder person speaking to an equal, when he wanted to know what was on my mind.

All the same I was greatly embarrassed. I wanted to brush the subject aside, to say that I hadn't yet found the right girl, but one look at Trifonov told me that he knew everything.

We were different people, different in age, different in education, in our experience of life. But at that moment I was certain I had no greater friend than this elderly man.

I said nothing. Trifonov dropped the subject.

"Well, what about the houses?" he asked.

I looked at him, disconcerted.

"Don't look at me like that. I'm an old man and I can't

help in matters of love. Anyway you won't take my advice but do things your own way. As for the houses, I want to know what else you are going to do about them. So will the men, I suppose. You got a refusal at the works and at the Regional Party Committee?"

"Yes, that's how things stand," I replied gloomily. "Only I'm not giving up the fight. I'm going to write to-day to the Ministry and to the Central Committee."

"You think you'll break through?"

"I will if I have to smash my head!"

"Save your head for better things," Trifonov said with a wry smile. He rose to his feet and asked, "What about going home?"

"I'll stay here for a while and rest, Pavel Kharitonovich," I replied.

"All right, go ahead," Trifonov said and walked off.

I was left there alone. Not wanting to sit on the stones, I found a little glade and stretched myself out on the grass. Soon I shut my eyes and contemplated a speck drifting in a reddish mist as I had often enjoyed doing when a child. Perhaps it was the sun's warmth or the after-effects of the drinks of the previous evening and the almost sleepless night I had passed that made me feel drowsy and I dropped off almost at once.

I was awakened by the voices of Svetlana and Kramov. For the first few moments I thought I was still asleep and dreaming.

"We all change," Kramov was saying. "'There is no power that can stop time, or arrest its traces,' as one wise book puts it. We all change: you and I, and Andrei."

"You think Andrei has changed?" Svetlana asked quickly.

"Oh no, not really, I didn't mean that," Kramov replied.

No, I was not dreaming.

My first impulse was to jump to my feet. But something held me back. No doubt it was the simple wish to hear what they were talking about. I was unable to say how long I had been asleep and how long Svetlana and Kramov had been there: if they saw me they would assume that I had been eavesdropping.

That last thought, incidentally, came to me later. As a matter of fact I was eager to hear their talk. Of course, that was discreditable of me, but I might as well be frank.

"I think you're right," said Svetlana. "Andrei has changed."

"Do you think so?" said Kramov diffidently. "In what way?"

"It is difficult to explain. He's acquired greater determination."

"He was never short of that, was he?" said Kramov with a sarcastic laugh.

"No, that's something different. How can I put it? Formerly he was determined in a general way but over small things was mild, yielding and sometimes fascinated with details. And now he's grown somehow sharper... and unbending. Well, I'm really at a loss to explain."

"Have you fallen out with each other?" Kramov asked very graciously.

"No, no!" replied Svetlana. "Everything's all right!"

My heart was pounding so loudly, I was afraid they might hear its beats.

"Listen, Svetlana," Kramov went on, "we're not children. I have no right to probe in your affairs or question you, but as a friend of Andrei's may I ask you if you intend to marry him?"

"Marry him?" echoed Svetlana, as though she had not quite caught the meaning of the question.

"Yes, that's what I'm asking. Andrei loves you. He admitted that to me. You—well, you understand what I mean."

"And I love Andrei," Svetlana replied, in a loud, almost defiant voice.

"Then what's the difficulty?"

"Surely you know life's not as simple as that?" Svetlana's words broke from the very depths of her being. "But," she added in a different tone, "in the long run I shall marry him. Any more questions?"

"Yes, when?"

"You want to dance at the wedding?"

"Why not if there is to be one?"

"Have you any doubts on that score?"

"No, why should I have?" Kramov asked casually. "If I had any doubts previously, you have dispelled them. You suit each other perfectly. You'll probably spend the rest of your lives digging tunnels through a score of mountains and will end your days at the foot of the twenty-first, regretting that there are thousands of other mountains which you have been unable to dig tunnels through for reasons beyond your control."

"Probably that's how it will be. Anything wrong with that?" asked Svetlana.

"No, nothing at all," he replied. "You're both cut out for a romantic and exciting life. Especially you. Do you remember our talk at the lake that time? Do you recall what I told you when Andrei was collecting those samples of rock?"

"I find the talk unpleasant, Nikolai Nikolayevich."

"Which? The one we had then or the one we're having now?"

I caught the sound of moving stones and guessed that Svetlana must be rising to her feet.

"All right," Kramov said. "I won't mention the subject again. You, Svetlana, are trying to escape from yourself, your own thoughts and doubts. That is impossible. You can walk miles and miles around yourself and the

outcome of such a journey may be nothing but fatigue and disappointment."

Then, abruptly changing the subject, he said in a brittle tone:

"I wanted to have a talk with Andrei about the quotas. The rate-fixer who came around messed up things horribly. What about your sector?"

Svetlana explained that the quotas I had settled at the very outset were practically the same as those set down by the man from the works.

"That's why your workmen showed such a low rate of speed," Kramov said with conviction, and as though arguing the matter with someone added, "How can you expect people to work in a place like this among bare mountains if there is no money in it?"

"But even after the quotas have been changed your rate is still higher than ours."

"And I'll keep it up, cost what it may," Kramov declared with sudden harshness. "But you're thinking of laying on welfare services now."

"Andrei thinks the living conditions of the workers should be improved."

"He's a romantic." Kramov did not trouble to conceal the scorn in his voice. "Romanticism is not a bad thing, but unfortunately it's not part of the schedule when you're building a tunnel. If it were Andrei would be in his element. Incidentally, I'm a romantic, too."

"You don't say?"

"And you doubted it? My romanticism's different, though."

"I don't think it's any good looking for Andrei," Svetlana put in.

They passed very near me but failed to see me behind the boulders.

When their footsteps and voices had died away I jumped to my feet. My first impulse was to run after them,

grasp Kramov by the shoulder, swing him round and sock him.

What had brought him here when we had parted only a few hours earlier?

Suddenly it dawned on me that Kramov was a coward. He was scared that he had said too much, that I had seen through the false words with which he had tried to cover up his utter heartlessness. He was scared at my sudden departure and had hastened after me, to mislead me with more words and a new show of sincerity.

Kramov really was a coward, a coward through and through. Previously he had not been afraid of me. He regarded me as a youngster fascinated by his personality, someone in front of whom he could strike attitudes without the least risk of being seen through. But now he was afraid of me, afraid of his own incautious words.

The resentment that now seized me had nothing of despair in it. I felt strong. The defeats I had just suffered did not depress me. I knew that I would go on fighting, fighting with all my might.

I walked to the site, straying from the path, stumbling over stones but feeling no pain.

The first persons I saw when I reached the sector were Svetlana and Kramov. They stood watching the road leading to the wood. But I appeared from a different direction and they saw me only when I was practically at their side.

Kramov stepped forward with hand outstretched and a beaming smile.

"Where did you disappear to?" he asked. "I drove over but you weren't here. Your foreman told me you'd stayed behind in the mountains to get a breath of fresh air. Svetlana and I went to look for you but we had no luck."

I walked past Kramov towards Svetlana, pretending not to see his outstretched hand.

"Why don't you shake hands?" Kramov asked.

I had not expected this question. I thought he would drop his hand without further comment.

"But I left you only a short while ago, Nikolai Nikolayevich," I remarked, turning and looking straight into his blue eyes. "I spent half the night at your place."

"I thought you'd want to forget about that," Kramov said calmly, his eyes darkening slightly.

A car came sweeping down the road. Who might it be, I wondered, trying to identify the man sitting beside the driver.

It was Falaleyev. He seldom came to our sector and I was puzzled as to what brought him here on a Sunday of all days. With difficulty his heavy frame tumbled out of the car. Wheezing and puffing, he walked towards us.

"So everybody's here," he commented, then added, fixing his glance on me, "a fine mess you've made."

I realized at once that he was referring to my visit to the Regional Party Committee. Somebody must have rung up the works from there and told them to "tick me off," to give it to me good and hard for all the things I had said.

Well, I supposed I had it coming to me. Only it was a pity it had to happen in front of Kramov.

"So it's houses you want," Falaleyev shouted, clasp- ing and unclasping his plump, stubby hands. "And have you figured out the labour you'll need and the building materials? Do you know what type of house you want to build? Yet, it's houses, houses you're after."

I shrugged.

"Why talk about it now, Comrade Falaleyev?" I said averting my gaze. "The matter's been settled."

"What's been settled?" Falaleyev continued to shout. "You think that just because the Secretary of the Regional Party Committee issues instructions your houses'll spring up overnight. I know the sort of sob stuff you've been handing them. The Secretary rings up the manag-

ing director, the Executive Committee rings up too, tomorrow the instructors are coming. They're threatening to take three pre-fabricated houses from the management's holiday settlement and give them to you. And all for Comrade Arefyev, the great protector of the people. Couldn't you have settled the matter quietly, just between ourselves? Couldn't you have done that, I ask?"

I stood there completely stunned, unable to grasp the import of his words.

"Let's go to your office," Falaleyev went on. "Make up the estimates. Tomorrow at nine I've got to report to the managing director."

And then I felt my whole being swept by joy. Everything that had no bearing on the houses receded into the background. I flung my arms round Falaleyev and hugged his big, fat body.

12

Winter sets in with startling speed in the Arctic. The first snow fell in the mountains early in September. At once it grew freezing cold. The wind became boisterous and biting, growing keener every day, making it hard to walk, and blowing with sudden gusts that almost knocked you off your feet. The mirror-like lakes shielded by mountains and woods remained calm, unruffled. But they, too, would soon be sheathed in ice. Heavy frosts began.

It was hard to believe that only a short while before the sun had shone right round the clock. The days grew noticeably shorter and each twenty-four hours night was gaining upon day.

One night the first heavy snow fell. It went on snowing all day and all through the following night and half the next day without stopping, piling up on every side of our new, quickly assembled houses. The wind did not

abate, sweeping the snow from open spaces and making it hang like enormous eaves over hollows and gorges, filling in the crevices and levelling the undulations in the mountains.

Finally even the brief four or five hours of daylight dwindled to nothing. The sun did not rise at all, leaving the night complete mistress of the Arctic.

I realized all this quite suddenly.

Previously all the weeks of building houses and tunneling had so absorbed my attention that I had had no time to think of anything else. We had cut the first five hundred metres into the mountain and were now regularly fulfilling our quotas. Several times in the course of the day, blasts thundered at the face, shaking the snow on the mountains; the rock-dust rose in little eddies; at the opening of the tunnel electric locomotives scurried on round the clock hauling truckloads of rock out of the passage. Day and night the electric lights that lit up the snow-swept construction site burned incessantly swaying in the wind.

The clatter of the pneumatic drills no longer carried to the surface. We had gone too deep into the mountain for that. But in the tunnel itself there was a deafening din of drills and the hum of ventilation fans. Onward, onward! That was our one thought, our one objective.

Our little community in those days was a strongly knit group. Months of struggle, failure and achievement, of victory and loss, of so many things shared, had brought us so close together that we were like one big family.

Svetlana, too, was wholly immersed in work. She seemed to be seeking an escape from her thoughts, giving all of herself, all of her energy and time to her work. She rarely left the face, where she worked in a pall of rock-dust. And yet she found time to help Zaitsev, who came to our sector promptly twice a week.

It was during one of those winter days that a snow-slide came down on a stretch of the railway that ran round the mountain linking the nearby mine with the ore concentration works.

Happily the avalanche turned out to be a minor one, having lost much of its force on the way down. It did little harm to the homes of the pointsmen and switchmen which stood about twenty metres from the line; only the windows had caved in.

The works called out all hands. Every workman who was not on shift set out for the spot to clear the line.

Svetlana, a few of the workmen and myself returned home from the job only on the next day. We were chilled and exhausted and staggered from weariness. We had cleared the line and communications were restored.

I saw Svetlana to her room. She dropped on the bed just as she was, wearing a thick padded jacket and felt boots encrusted with ice, which soon began to thaw in the warm room.

For a few moments Svetlana sat there in silence, then she stretched out her hand for the little looking-glass that stood on the bedside table. She took a look at herself and flung the looking-glass on to the bed.

The forecast of a winter of light snow proved wrong. Enormous ledges of snow overhung the railway line and the opening of the tunnel, threatening to come hurtling down. Instructions were received from the works to build a protective wall against possible avalanches.

We built it.

But it was naïve to think that our two-line stone dam could resist or hold back an avalanche. All we could hope for was that any fall of snow would break against it and be robbed of some of its destructive power. However our houses remained entirely unprotected. The fact that

nobody could tell when an avalanche might come down presented another danger.

Invisible processes went on under the snow cover. At what moment would the avalanche descend on us—during the day when the houses were practically empty or at night when people were asleep?

That could not be foretold.

But that was what we newcomers to the Arctic thought. We never suspected that on the top of the mountains stood a small meteorological station, one of the many thousands scattered throughout the Soviet Union.

Naturally the management and the old residents knew of the existence of this station. At the request of the works weather experts had for several years been watching over the places likely to suffer from snow-slides. When there was threat of a snow-slide they at once sent warning by telephone to the works. It had to be borne in mind, of course, that communications were often disrupted: the wind, snowstorms and avalanches often broke the line.

But now the situation was more complicated. People were working on a construction site at the foot of the mountains and houses had been put up on the only level spot in this mountainous region.

The works sent a request to the meteorological station to keep watch for possible avalanches threatening our sector.

Still my mind was not at rest. After the first snow-slide I lived in a constant state of anxiety about the lives of our people, and racked my brains to think of some way of reducing the danger to a minimum. I decided to climb to the top of the mountain, establish personal contact with the station and then insist that the works set up telephone communications between the station and our sector.

A narrow winding path, so wind-swept that it was clear of snow, led to the top of the mountain. All along it ran iron posts linked by a steel rope to help mountain climbers. I knew I had a two-mile climb before me, and set out at seven in the morning, leaving Svetlana in charge at the base. The sky was black, which made me feel thankful for the snow covering the ground. Had it not been there it would have been impossible to take a single step without a lantern.

Clutching at the rope and leaning on a stick I had brought along, I went on climbing. For some time my way lay through a sparse wood of fairly tall trees. Somewhere above ravens were croaking as they flew from fir to fir, sending the snow down on me from the quivering boughs.

At first it was freezing cold, with a raw north wind. But after I had climbed about three hundred metres I felt perspiration streaming down my back. I had had no inkling that the climb would prove so difficult.

It was ten o'clock when I finally reached the summit. The last few paces were up a steep slope and right to the very last step I had no idea what kind of a view would open up before me.

At last I saw it.

For some minutes I stood spell-bound. The mountain summit turned out to be a vast snowy plateau with the towering peaks of the neighbouring mountains surrounding it on all sides. These peaks were swept clean of snow by the wind and looked as though they had been powdered with charcoal. Mountains, mountains everywhere as far as the eye could see, then precipices, rocky step-ladders, great gateways of rock, all immersed in complete tranquillity. There was more light up here than down below—and besides it was nearly midday.

It all looked to me very much like the surface of the moon as we see it through a telescope. From here the

places in the mountains where the avalanches started were clearly visible. They resembled huge gutters.

Where is the station, I wondered, overwhelmed by the silence, the glare of the snow and the brilliance of the stars.

I walked straight across the plateau. In some places the snow was hard and only just giving underfoot with a faint crackling sound. But now and then the frozen crust cracked and I sank knee-deep in the snow.

At last I caught sight of a human figure. It was a man walking across my path. From time to time he bent down as though searching for something in the snow.

"Comrade!" I called at the top of my voice.

The man straightened himself up, stopped for a moment, and then came in my direction. I could see now that he wore a padded suit and was carrying a short-handled spade.

A few minutes later we introduced ourselves. His name was Vasily Semyonovich and he turned out to be the man in charge of the meteorological station. Hastily I explained to him what my mission was. He was as pleased as though he had been waiting all his life for me to call. We walked over to the station.

Soon we reached a long log house with a mast beside it and a little farther off the usual boxes containing various recording instruments. It all looked like the photographs I remembered seeing of North Pole winter stations.

We went indoors. It was very warm and cosy inside with the lights burning. I found myself in a passage with several doors opening off it, and while we were brushing the snow off our boots I heard someone speaking over a radio telephone behind one of the doors.

"Take down the weather forecast," said the voice.

"Wind nor'east, fifteen metres, rising at times to twenty-five. Temperature, eighteen below."

A few minutes later the whole staff of the station—three men, including Vasily Semyonovich—were grouped around me.

I could understand their delight and excitement. After all, for weeks and sometimes months these men saw nobody except those who brought provisions to them once a week. Hundreds of radio operators in all parts of the country regularly received bulletins from those people they never saw—the few brave meteorologists tucked away high up in the arctic mountains.

A special dinner was laid out in my honour. In the middle of the table in the small dining-room steamed a huge tureen of appetizing soup, there was a pot of gruel covered with a cloth, and a kettle simmered on the stove.

After dinner Vasily Semyonovich excused himself for a few minutes: he had to read the instruments. The wireless operator asked me to step into his room. His name was Misha and he had just graduated from technical school.

He was a fair-haired lad looking younger than his age and as he sat beside me on a bench he questioned me about Moscow.

"We really ought to have a drink to celebrate your visit. But—" He knitted his fair eyebrows, and lowering his voice as though he were confiding a great secret, he added, "Vasily Semyonovich is very strict about drinking. You understand... well, we're on special duty."

How could they live like that, I wondered. With no people around, no distractions and without a drink or two now and then just because of their "special duty." Days and nights, months and years, with the same unchanging moonlit landscape. And they were so young.

But perhaps all the three had temperaments especially adapted to such a life? On the surface that sort

of life may, of course, seem heroic and romantic. Yet at bottom these three men might be phlegmatic, cold-blooded creatures who did not demand much of the world. Perhaps this uneventful, even-flowing life was particularly suited to their natures.

I asked Misha:

"What made you come here? Were you really keen on the idea or...?"

"No," said Misha shaking his head. "I was keen on a different place, such as Verkhoyansk, you know that's in the north-east. It is a very interesting place for a meteorological wireless operator. It's supposed to be the coldest spot on earth. But I was sent here."

Just then my ear caught a sound like the twanging of a taut wire.

"What's that?" I asked.

"It's the wires singing and the aerial and the supports of our instruments. The wind's rising."

Vasily Semyonovich returned and asked me into his room. It did not take us long to come to an agreement about everything. Vasily Semyonovich assured me that the station would watch the snow on the east side of the mountain. What remained to be settled was the question of communications.

"What must be done now is to get a telephone wire up here from our sector," I said rising. "I'll go to the works tomorrow and insist on telephone communications being established. Thank you for the hospitality you've—"

"Are you thinking of leaving?" Vasily Semyonovich interrupted.

"Yes, I must," I said glancing at my watch. "It's after three now and I left at seven. That's eight hours ago, I certainly must be going."

"You can't go now."

"I must," I said determinedly. "I know you're pleased

to have a visitor and I'm awfully grateful but I really must go."

"This has nothing to do with hospitality. The wind's rising. Come and take a look."

We went outdoors, stepping out of the bright light into pitch darkness. Gone was the former stillness; the wind now howled fiercely in the gullies and precipices between the mountains. The invisible wires hummed. When my eyes had grown accustomed to the dark I distinguished a flurry of snow-flakes.

"Let's go in," said Vasily Semyonovich.

We went indoors again.

"You can't leave now," he said, brushing the snow off his boots. "Up here we have a capitalist type weather factory."

"Why capitalist?"

"It works without a plan," Vasily Semyonovich told me, grinning. "One day it's mass production of wind and blizzard, the next—complete depression. And all according to—what do they call it?—the law of spontaneity. You can't go in this weather, you'll have to wait."

Towards evening the wind rose again. Every two hours Misha transmitted a weather bulletin.

Vasily Semyonovich paced the room. The impassive professional voice in which Misha had read the first bulletin changed: there was now definitely a note of alarm in the calm he affected.

"Why are you so troubled, Vasily Semyonovich?" I inquired. "Surely you're doing all you can? You're transmitting bulletins that are as accurate as possible. Your station, I hope, is built to stand up to any weather. What's the matter?"

"I'll tell you," he replied, stopping before me. "The wind has risen suddenly. The temperature's dropping. There may be aircraft in the sky. And mountaineers and

skiers in the mountains. You see what I mean, don't you?"

He continued to pace nervously up and down the room.

There was a howl of wind in the corridor. The third man of the station came in, a meteorologist called Sinitin, the most taciturn of the three. He laid down his instruments, slipped off a mackintosh stiff with frost, and, sitting at the table, jotted something down on a sheet of paper.

"Forty," he said, pushing the paper aside. So the wind had got up to forty metres a second.

"Tell me," I inquired, infected by the general atmosphere of alarm, "d'you think there's a danger of snow-slides on our sector?"

"Not yet," replied Vasily Semyonovich. "The snow's not yet ready to move on the eastern slope. It's too early for it to shift."

I felt relieved.

Two hours passed. The wind no longer seemed to be rising, but even falling a little.

"Well, we can take it easy now," said Vasily Semyonovich. "The storm's abating. You'll go home in the morning."

What a nuisance, I thought. I'd come for half a day and would have spent nearly twenty-four hours here. I was wondering what was happening down there, at the tunnel.

There was nothing to be done about it, and I went into Vasily Semyonovich's room. Misha brought in the teapot. A feeling of peace and comfort settled on me again. We drank tea. Vasily Semyonovich suggested going to sleep, offering me the spare bed in his room.

"Have you been long in these parts?" he asked me in the darkness after we had turned in.

I told him I was practically a new-comer.

"I don't imagine you were very keen on coming to work in such an out-of-the-way place as this?" he went on. "You're young and must want to be near places where there's a bit of civilization."

"You're not so old yourself," I parried, "and Misha is quite a youngster, yet you've both come here."

"Well, our work is different, we've no time to get bored over here."

"But to me your work seems—well, rather dull, I should say."

"Does it really? Well, you're wrong. Is there anything dull about the sky—or the wind? Why, things change here four or five times a day."

He spoke of the sky and the wind as though he were in charge of them.

"Are you married, Vasily Semyonovich?" I asked.

"No. A wife would find life here boring, I imagine."

"Yes," I said, thinking of Svetlana. "You've got to have a special sort of temperament to work here."

"What sort, would you say?" Did I detect a touch of irony in his voice?

"Oh, I don't know," I answered, thinking of the people I knew and wondering which of them would find work here to their liking. "In any event, a person fond of change, or adventure wouldn't take on a job like this."

"And I wouldn't take on a person of that sort, not one who was over-fond of adventure," said Vasily Semyonovich hotly. "That's a type I can't stand."

It was obvious that these were not words idly spoken, that they had a foundation.

I longed to draw Vasily Semyonovich out and hear more of what he had to say on that subject.

I did my best.

"I think there's a certain fascination and attraction about people who like to take risks."

"You're still a young man," said Vasily Semyonovich in a cold and distant manner, "and if you'll take the advice of a man who's older than you, you'll never think much of such people."

" 'If only youth knew how, if only old age were capable,' " I quoted.

"If you care to hear it, I'll tell you a story about a man I knew who was fond of taking risks," said Vasily Semyonovich abruptly. "So that youth may know."

Here it comes, I told myself and replied hurriedly:

"Please do, Vasily Semyonovich."

"Well, it happened at the front," he began. "I volunteered while I was still in my first year at college—I didn't graduate till after the war. But that's beside the point. I was in the reconnaissance corps at that time, serving on the First Ukrainian Front. It was the end of forty-three or the beginning of forty-four, I don't quite recall. Anyway it was after Stalingrad, things had taken a turn for the better. . . . But that too is beside the point. In short, I learned one day that a new divisional intelligence officer, a major, had been appointed.

"Well, we were quick to find things out in our job. Hardly a week passed before we knew everything there was to know about this major. We knew he'd been an engineer who'd worked till forty-three somewhere in the Urals on the reserve list but that he'd insisted on being sent to the front lines, and that he'd served for a time on the staff of another division before he was sent to ours. In fact, he seemed all right.

"Before long he sent for me. I went into the dug-out and reported as usual. He interrupted my report and pulled down my saluting hand. 'Sit down,' he said, 'we reconnaissance men don't stand on ceremony.'

"I took a good look at him in the dim light of the dug-out. He was young and handsome and had a frank look about him. We had all taken to him at once, but less

than a month went by before, for some reason, he made us suspicious of him. There was something unpleasant about him—a strange mixture of sincerity, friendliness and democratic manner with cruelty, real cruelty, there's no other word for it.

“As a rule, and that's the truth, reconnaissance men are decent, straightforward fellows. But you'll find among them some who are—how shall I put it?—well, reckless is perhaps the word for it. You could single them out from the rest at once: they'd not be dressed quite according to regulations, wearing some special belt, very smart low-tipped boots, or a cap at a rakish angle, they walked with a swagger to show they were the salt of the earth, and they were inclined to take a drop too much of vodka.

“As time went on I realized that the major kept a careful record of the slightest slips any of the men made. Well, I thought to myself, that's not so bad, he's just stiffening up discipline a bit, that's all. And if he'd punished the men according to their deserts no one would have said a word against him. But one day one of my scouts, a man named Kravtsov, came to me all worked up. As a scout he was worth his weight in gold, but he had got into a bad habit: whenever he'd been on a successful mission, he'd celebrate it by getting drunk and kicking up a row. Well, that Kravtsov rushes up to me and says, ‘The major called me in and asked, “Do you drink?”’ “A drop now and then, Comrade Major,” I tell him. “And the day before yesterday you were drunk enough to disobey your commanding officer, weren't you?”’

“All his disobedience amounted to was refusing to turn in when he was ordered to. I had myself intended to give him three days confined to quarters for it. ‘Well,’ Kravtsov went on, ‘I explains to the major what happened. He just looks at me coolly and says, “For drunkenness and insubordination to your commanding officer

I can have you sent to a punishment squad, is that clear?" I don't say a thing. "Well then," he says, "you'll go out on reconnaissance today. And I'll expect you to come back with a live prisoner. If you succeed you'll be all right. If you fail, report to me and we'll go into your case." Then he grabs hold of my belt, pulls me to himself and says, "Get me that prisoner—alive, understand?"

"Kravtsov was shaking violently as he told me all this. 'I risk my life seven times a week,' he said. 'But I do it for my country and not for my commanding officer.'

"You can well understand that I did not wish to undermine the authority of a senior officer and so I explained to Kravtsov that he'd misunderstood the major. I told him that he certainly deserved to be punished for drunkenness and as for capturing a live prisoner, the major wasn't the only one who'd be pleased with that.

"Kravtsov went on his mission and brought back a prisoner. A week later he was awarded the For Valour medal, while the major received the "Patriotic War" order. It was only later that I learned that on the day after he sent Kravtsov out for that prisoner a big shot from the army staff was due to visit our division.

"D'you think this incident with Kravtsov was just a chance episode?" went on Vasily Semyonovich. "Oh, no! It was part of a system of sending on the most perilous missions men guilty of some breach of discipline. He had these men in a vise and put before them the alternatives: a successful mission or a court-martial. For their exploits these men were rewarded, I grant you that. But even in such cases he twisted the matter so that they felt obliged to him personally for the citations they received. These were things about him that I found out much later.

"People like the major are as a rule cowards. Still I can't say that the major was a coward. He won his second decoration—the Red Banner Order—for personal valour! But his valour was of the premeditated kind. He

knew just when to be brave, so that it should not go unnoticed. He would say that he was fond of taking risks and of reckless people and even that he had made a mistake in choosing for himself the peaceful profession of an engineer. But that's not the main point of my story."

I held my breath, eager not to miss a single word of what Vasily Semyonovich was saying. And as I listened I could see Kramov in uniform with a major's insignia. Kramov, Kramov, Kramov, a voice in my head kept repeating.

"Go on! Go on!" I cried impatiently, when the silence dragged.

"There was a girl in our regiment called Masha serving as a medical orderly. A splendid girl who'd only just finished school when the war began. One of our scouts fell in love with Masha. His name was Kostya Palekhin. There were quite a number of men in our regiment who would have been happy to be in his boots"—Vasily Semyonovich's voice suddenly grew hollow—"but it was Kostya she loved. At the front all sorts of things happened and all sorts of stories were spread. But, however that may be, Kostya and Masha loved each other with a deep and pure love. And they were planning to get married as soon as the war was over.

"And then Masha caught the major's eye. There was nothing he didn't stop at. We learned all this much later. He tried to get her transferred to divisional headquarters to have her nearer to him. But she was adamant—went to the general and had her way. And she stayed on with us.

"It was then that the following happened. On one mission Kostya was lightly wounded and spent about a week in the field hospital. When he got out of the hospital, his leg was still giving him pain and we spared him and didn't send him on any missions so that the wound would have a chance to heal properly.

"One day we got orders: Palekhin and I to report at once to the major at divisional headquarters. When we were admitted we found the major looking glum, not at all his usual self. And without greeting us he said, 'Feeling fit, Palekhin?' 'Quite fit,' Kostya replied. 'You'll go out on a mission tonight,' said the major. 'To this sector here, look!'

"He pointed to the place on his map.

"My heart stood still. It was the most dangerous sector in the German defences, constantly under fire.

" 'We've got to pin-point the enemy's firing positions,' the major went on. 'You know these places better than anyone else.'

"At that point I interrupted him:

" 'Comrade Major, Senior Sergeant Palekhin's leg is still giving him trouble.'

"The major looked at Kostya and asked, 'Is that true?' 'The wound's still bleeding a little,' Kostya said. 'You reported for duty a few days ago, didn't you? Strange,' the major said through his teeth, 'strange that you should remember your wound only after being given your mission.'

"Kostya flushed, drew himself up and said:

" 'I'm quite fit, Comrade Major. Permit me to go and prepare for my mission.' 'Go!' said the major.

"That night Kostya was killed. Because of his bad leg he fell behind the others when the Germans opened their murderous fire on them. They went back but when they had dragged him out of danger he was dead. Of the five scouts sent on this mission three lost their lives. We buried Kostya, and the whole regiment was present."

"What about Masha?" I asked.

"It wrung our hearts to look at her. She didn't shed a tear. But her young, almost childish face grew years older. When Kostya's body was brought up to the

grave on a gun-waggon Masha stood for a long time gazing at his face. We'd laid him on a bed of fir twigs. We all stood waiting in silence until that last painful farewell of hers was over."

Vasily Semyonovich fell silent. He had found the last words difficult to utter.

"Later on Masha went to the major," he continued, mastering his emotion. "I have no idea what they said to each other. Only after that the major didn't show up in our regiment for a week. Masha got a transfer to another division."

"D'you mean to say that blackguard went unpunished?" I cried. "Wasn't he court-martialled or reduced to the ranks?"

"Why should he be?" Vasily Semyonovich asked bitterly. "He had done nothing against regulations. Not one of his actions incriminated him in any way. Even we were not able to size him up for what he was, not till he'd safely left the army."

"When did he go?" I asked, my heart pounding.

"I don't know," said Vasily Semyonovich, his tone now quite indifferent. "Staff officers said that some ministry had sent in a request for him and he's returned to civilian life. And now that he had two decorations and a front-line record he didn't need to take any further risks. It was for that he had joined the army. I imagine he made his own arrangements to get a job in the rear.

"That is why I have a strong aversion for such people who make a show of being brave and willing to take risks. And I tell you that behind most risks, if they are not taken to promote something big, to further the good of the people, there are the most selfish motives and plain fortune-seeking. Well that's that," said Vasily Semyonovich wearily, "and now let's sleep."

"Just one more question, please, Vasily Semyonovich," I said. "What was the major's name?"

"His name? What does it matter? Well, it was Antonov, as a matter of fact. Go to sleep!"

"It can't be!" I cried. "You must have forgotten or got the name mixed up with someone else's."

"Mixed up?" said Vasily Semyonovich in surprise. "Why should I? Anyway it's not important. Let's go to sleep. I've got to be up working soon and you've got the climb down ahead of you."

But it was a long time before I could get to sleep.

I was awakened by a jarring noise which seemed to come from somewhere quite close.

"Vasily Semyonovich, are you asleep?" I whispered.

"No."

"What's that noise?"

"It's the damper. In the stove. It's as good as one of our instruments. When it makes that noise it means that the wind's speed is twenty metres a second. It's absolutely reliable."

He got out of bed.

"Where are you going?" I asked. "What time is it?"

"Two a.m.," he replied bringing his phosphorescent watch-dial to his eyes. "You can go to sleep again."

"And you?"

"Me? I can't, the damper won't let me."

He turned on the light. That devil of a damper went on jarring louder and louder, and then began to rattle in a sort of wild dance. Why didn't he pull it out? I wondered. But Vasily Semyonovich had apparently lost interest in it. He left the room without another word.

I got into my clothes and glanced down the corridor. There was nobody there. I went to the front door, opened it and stuck my head out into the darkness. An icy blast hit me in the face. I slammed the door shut. Outside there was a barrage of noise—whining, rumbling and chattering.

Vasily Semyonovich appeared at the other end of the corridor wearing a green tarpaulin cloak with a hood. On his chest dangled a battery lamp like the ones we used in the tunnel. In one hand he held a spade, in the other a small box.

"Are you going out?" I asked, realizing at once what a silly question that was.

"I've got to measure the snow," Vasily Semyonovich replied as he passed me.

"Wait a minute," I cried. "Let me come along."

"All right," Vasily Semyonovich replied. "You can give me a hand. The others are busy."

Outdoors we found ourselves in a veritable hell. The wind, which seemed to be pricking with a thousand sharp needles, blew from all sides. I was straight away knocked off my feet. Vasily Semyonovich crawled along on all fours. I crawled after him in the darkness against the wall of the storm, taking my bearings only from the flimsy beam of torchlight that wriggled beside Vasily Semyonovich on the snow. I wanted to shout something to him but the moment I opened my mouth the wind filled it with snow. I choked. It seemed that the blizzard would attain such vigour that it would carry off and destroy everything on the mountains. But Vasily Semyonovich kept crawling forward, raking the snow out of his path with his bare hands, moving his arms as though rowing in stormy waters. He handed me the spade but held on to the box. The torch went out and we crawled on in darkness.

Suddenly a black object shot up in the air brushing against my face. A few moments later Vasily Semyonovich stopped. The torch went on again. In the narrow strip of light I saw a dense wall of snow. Vasily Semyonovich was bareheaded: the wind must have torn his cap off.

"Dig, dig," he shouted, bending so close to me that his cold rough lips brushed against my cheek.

I began digging a trench in the snow with no idea for what purpose it was intended. But I couldn't dig lying down and to stand up was impossible.

Vasily Semyonovich snatched the spade out of my hands and began to dig himself. He went about it the way soldiers do when they are digging a fox-hole under heavy fire.

"Hang on to the snow-gauge. Quick!" cried Vasily Semyonovich.

I realized that he was referring to the heavy box, which had started to roll away.

Having dug a hole in the snow Vasily Semyonovich handed me the spade and lowered the snow-gauge into the hole. Then he sat on it, drew a stop-watch from under his tarpaulin and turned the beam of his torch on it. As he raised himself to take out the stop-watch the wind wrenched a board out of the box and carried it away into the darkness.

"Damn it!" muttered Vasily Semyonovich, removing one mitt and stuffing it into the opening in the side of the snow-gauge.

I don't remember how we managed to crawl back and tumble into the corridor.

Vasily Semyonovich was an awful sight. His hair and eyebrows were covered with frozen snow.

"You must warm yourself straight away," I said through lips that could scarcely move.

Ignoring my words he took off his tarpaulin, hung it on a peg in the corridor, rubbed his hands for a few seconds with snow which he scooped off his own head and then dragged the snow-gauge into the room. He called to me from the threshold.

"Don't go near the stove, wait a while. Skip about a bit in the corridor."

The blizzard raged all night and most of the following day. In the evening I left the station. The blizzard had spent itself. The same serene tranquillity that had greeted me on my arrival reigned once more over the mountains.

Vasily Semyonovich told me that during the night the wind had attained a velocity of fifty metres a second. It had blown so fiercely that it had carried off a little porch which had recently been attached to the main building with iron staples. The weather-recording apparatus and all the instruments the station possessed had been in danger. The wireless operator and the meteorologist had fought the blizzard all night, strengthening the aerial, winding thick ropes round the weather-box with the instruments and tying the ends to supports.

Vasily Semyonovich saw me to the descent. I started to walk down and he stood for a long time watching me.

I descended slowly, holding on to the steel rope that ran by the path. But in many places the snowstorm had loosened the iron supports which held the rope and it trailed in the snow. The descent was a difficult one.

Yet the reason it seemed such hard going to me was not because the path was snow-swept and the rope slipped from my hands, but because my heart was heavy.

The whistling and howling of the blizzard still rang in my ears and against this background of sound I could distinctly hear the words of Vasily Semyonovich's story about the major.

As I climbed down I couldn't get the image of Kramov in uniform and a major's insignia out of my mind. It was Kramov, Kramov, Kramov, I kept telling myself. Vasily Semyonovich had for some reason refused to reveal his real name. He knew—surely he must know—that Kramov was here at the foot of the mountain, he did not

want to mention him by name, he was afraid that it might lead to a quarrel, that he would be accused of slander. What was it he had said about the major? He hadn't done anything against regulations. There was not a reason in the world to bring him before a court-martial. Yes, that was it.

But could matters rest at that? The major had been responsible for the death of a good and brave man. Because of that a girl's life had been ruined. Yet no charge could be brought against him.

Palekhin was dead while Kramov was going his old way, the way of a callous careerman—honoured, held up as an example.

Why should I not fight Kramov? Why should I not try to show him up for what he was, drive him out of our life? How could I allow him to corrupt people, to poison Svetlana's mind with doubts?

I saw and realized only too well that Kramov was indirectly, if not directly, responsible for Svetlana's state of mind.

Svetlana, Svetlana, I said in my thoughts. Surely you must feel the way I do, surely you must see through him as I do and join me in my fight against him?

In my climb down I kept thinking of Svetlana, dearer to me than anyone else in the world.

And I make no mistake when I say that even at those moments when I criticized her, when disagreements arose to alienate us, I loved her all the same. I saw her as she had come here to the Arctic to be at my side, felt her hands pressing my temples, her fingers in my hand.

I continued to climb down, sinking in the snow, not noticing when I strayed from the path or when I found it again.

Kramov's image kept haunting me, hovering before my eyes.

It was night when I reached our sector, now smothered in snow. The barracks, which we had converted into a tool shed, lay in darkness.

No lights burned in the windows of our houses, which stood in the shape of an inverted Lat the foot of the mountain. Apparently everyone had gone to bed. Only in Svetlana's room a light burned. The thought that she was not asleep, that perhaps she was waiting up for me, cheered me immensely.

At such moments it seems to you that a person who has previously not understood you or has disagreed with you will now certainly agree and understand.

This new and orderly pattern of thought does not eliminate the problem it has been so hard to solve, but helps to open the way to its solution. On the other hand, of course, that may be a sort of self-deception, a succumbing to illusion.

At any rate, just then I was certain that I had only to see Svetlana and lay before her my thoughts and all the conclusions I had drawn for her to understand me, for everything to be cleared up.

In our new house Svetlana's room was next to mine.

I burst into her room without even knocking, just as I was, in my sheepskin and fur cap.

Svetlana, in a brightly-coloured dressing-gown, was lying on her bed reading.

Hastily throwing her book aside she asked anxiously: "What's the matter, Andrei?"

"I'm through with Kramov for good," I announced.

Svetlana gave me a look of surprise.

"Have you been to see him?"

"No, but it makes little difference. Everything's clear to me now, clear from beginning to end," I said, pacing up and down the room and leaving traces of melting snow. "He's deceiving people, he's deceiving us. I've got

to tell everyone about it, I must, d'you understand? Why don't you say something, Svetlana?"

"What can I say? What must I say?"

"I don't understand how you feel about Kramov, Svetlana. I don't understand what he wants of you. Does he want you and me to quarrel? Does he want to drive a wedge between us? Wait a minute, don't argue with me. I happened to overhear your talk with him in the mountains when you went out to look for me the other day. I want you to understand me, Svetlana. Kramov now stands for everything I despise in life. And now—now I've found out something about him that— He's simply a blackguard, a criminal if what I've heard is true. And I feel I can't keep my mouth shut. I must put people wise to what he really is. From now on I'm fighting him. And I want to know whether you're on my side or not?"

I stood before her with my coat open, my cap pushed to the back of my head, my face flushed from the quick descent and my struggle with the deep snow.

Svetlana approached me, took off my coat and cap and hung them on a peg near the door.

"Listen, Andrei," she said, sitting down again. "Why must I always be deciding matters, always be forced to make some sort of choice, to take the responsibility for matters or people that are not directly connected with either you or me? Zaitsev is discontented with the life he's leading and I have to worry about him. The workers' conditions are hard—I must seek a solution. And now you come to me about Kramov. Again I must decide something, take sides for or against. It's like trying to puzzle out charades all the time. Life's very hard that way, Andrei."

"Life's not a stagnant pool."

"Well, I wouldn't care to live in a waterfall all the time."

"Those aren't your own words, Svetlana, not your own thoughts. They're Kramov's."

"Stop it!" Svetlana cried. "Kramov's got nothing to do with it. You're torturing me, that's what you're doing."

She uttered those last words with such weariness and pain in her voice that I felt bewildered.

"All this long time I've missed you so much," Svetlana went on. "I longed for you to come to me free from all care for Zaitsev, Kramov and the houses—just for once. So many times I would hear your steps in the corridor, hear you go to your door, so near to mine. At times I wanted to scream through the wall separating you from me, 'Come, come to me!' No, don't speak just yet. I know I'm to blame for much. I know you love me. I know your love is strong, true, deep and all the same I'm afraid of something and keep putting off things. But you too are to blame for this state of affairs. You know that I'm alone here, quite alone."

She burst into tears. She wept without hiding her face, without raising her hands to it, without trying to restrain her tears, or dry them. I rushed to her, sat down beside her on the bed and drew her head to my chest.

Suddenly the room was flooded with transparent light.

Fire—flashed across my mind, fire in the gallery. A cable must have shorted.

We dashed to the door.

The whole sky was aflame. In an instant it grew dark again. Then pale greenish patches of light streamed across it, giving way before our eyes to shafts that were faintly red at the base, then into great blazing fires, until the whole sky was spanned by a vast arched bridge of coloured lights.

"Look, Svetlana, look. The northern lights," I exclaimed, spellbound by the wonderful play of colour.

Svetlana drew me back into the room. She switched off the light and the frosted window-panes gleamed with all the colours of the rainbow. The beams of colour fell on the floor, walls and ceiling of the room; it was as though frisky little squirrels with bushy illuminated tails were whirling round us in a magic dance.

Now we were alone, truly alone. Everything receded far into the distance as though ceasing to exist: our doubts and resentments, Kramov, the tunnel, everything. It all happened so suddenly.

"Trust me, I beg you, trust me," whispered Svetlana. "You are the only person I want, the only one I love."

Happiness suffused my whole being. I felt Svetlana's burning hands clasping my cheeks.

"Don't go away... stay with me here tonight," she whispered.

I stayed till early morning. Softly I tiptoed back to my room. My dream had come true. Svetlana was now my wife. Neither of us had mentioned that word, but did that matter?

Everything around seemed changed now. I lay on my bed, a feeling of ineffable joy flooding my body.

Yet I fell asleep.

I was awakened by the sound of loud voices and heavy steps in the corridor.

I listened hard. The voices beyond the wall went on talking. Somebody called my name several times and then there was a knock on the door.

Greatly alarmed I opened the door and came face to face with Agafonov.

"Hurry, Comrade Arefyev, you're wanted on the telephone."

I rushed to the office. The receiver lay on the table.

"Wherever have you been, Comrade Arefyev?" the works dispatcher asked nervously. "There's been a snow-

slide on the road. Between the works and the western sector. We're afraid the lorry driver's been killed. Get a rescue party together as quickly as you can and go off to the road."

It was still very dark when we reached the spot and saw the trees brought down by the avalanche, the bared mountain slope and the mound of snow blocking the road.

Workmen from the western sector with Kramov in charge reached the place about the same time we did.

I suppressed my feeling of repulsion and asked Kramov whose lorry had been buried under the snow.

"I don't know," he replied curtly.

"Strange. The road was closed, there had been an avalanche warning."

"Apparently the driver didn't know about it."

Falaleyev took charge of the digging. Dozens of safety-lamps were lighted and the spades dug into the snow.

In less than an hour the smashed side of the lorry came into view. We redoubled our efforts, the spades flashing in the lamplight. We had but one thought—to get to the front of the lorry as quickly as possible.

Although we knew we could hardly expect to find the driver alive, there was a glimmer of hope in our hearts. At last we cleaved the snow from the cab. The driver was dead. The walls of the cab had saved him from being crushed by the avalanche but he had suffocated in a prison of snow. I climbed up to look at his face.

I could hardly restrain a cry. Against the broken back of the seat lay Zaitsev. His face was white, his arms were stretched out as though in an attempt to repel the wall of snow that had swept down on him.

Everything before my eyes—the broken remains of the snow-swept lorry, Zaitsev's body with its outstretched arms—seemed to be revolving slowly around its own axis.

For a second or two I shut my eyes. When I opened

them again I saw Kramov's back. He was leaning over the body.

"Look here, Kramov," I said, the words coming with difficulty, "it's Zaitsev."

Kramov started when he heard me, then he drew himself up slowly, turned round to face me and replied in a calm and, for him, unusually solemn manner:

"Yes. He died at his post."

The men of the western sector carried Zaitsev away: it was impossible to get a car to the place of the accident.

The funeral was fixed for the following evening beside the road, at the place where Zaitsev had met his death. Everyone on our sector who was not working went along.

Svetlana walked at my side. Soon we saw the funeral procession approaching from Kramov's sector.

Two workmen carrying lighted torches walked in front. They were followed by men bearing the coffin on their shoulders. On every chest blazed a safety-lamp. The rear of the procession was brought up by a lorry with its head-lamps draped in black cloth.

The mountains seemed to move and close in on the procession. The soot from the torches stained the white snow.

Before the body was committed to the grave the coffin was placed in the open back of the lorry, on a timber platform. The torch-bearers stood at the head. Kramov climbed on to the platform. I could see his face clearly in the torchlight; it was tensely solemn. Kramov wore a quilted jacket and despite the cold he had his collar unbuttoned. He had tied a black armband to his sleeve.

"Friends, comrades-in-arms," he began in a quiet, clear voice, "today we are burying our fellow-worker, a soldier in the little army that is storming this mountain. Zaitsev died at his post. He needs no monument. Let this tunnel which we shall complete before the appointed time be his memorial."

Then, after a long pause, he said:

"Farewell, dear comrade."

He bent down over the dead body and kissed Zaitsev on the forehead.

Speeches by representatives from the works and public organizations followed. I hardly heard anything that was said: Kramov's voice and Svetlana's sobs rang in my ears.

Svetlana and I walked back to the sector in silence. Svetlana was in a sort of trance. Her eyes seemed to have caught and held a reflection of the flickering tongues of the torch flames. I saw her to her room. She sat down on the bed.

"How dreadful! Tomorrow he was to have come to me for a lesson. It's awful," she said, looking somewhere beyond me.

I could think of nothing that could comfort her. I myself felt crushed and overwhelmed by what had happened.

Twenty-four hours ago I had been inexpressibly happy and happiness had blotted out everything that had been worrying me. And suddenly everything had turned dark again.

What cruel and stupid death, I thought. How had it happened? Who was responsible for the death of this really fine lad, so eager to gain knowledge and win happiness? Was it an accident really? Blind chance? Why had he gone along that road which had been declared closed? And why was he at the wheel, a beginner and not a regular driver? I checked the log-book: there, in Agafonov's handwriting, was the message from the works with instructions to close the road. The time the message was taken was there too: several hours before the snow-slip. That meant that the same order had been received on the western sector, on all sectors.

Why then had Zaitsev gone along that road? Who had allowed him to do so?

Who? Who? I asked aloud.

"What are you talking about?" Svetlana asked absently.

"I'm wondering why Kramov sent Zaitsev."

"Oh, he may have had many reasons for doing so. Some urgent business at the works."

"But what about the order to close the road?"

"He may have sent Zaitsev before the message got there."

That really might have been the reason. Kramov might have sent Zaitsev before the order came through. Zaitsev might have done whatever Kramov had asked him to do and then gone off to the settlement on some business of his own. Nobody there would have known of the closing of the road and on the way back Zaitsev had been caught by the avalanche. Yes, that might have been it.

"Yes, he may have," I said.

But Svetlana was not listening to me. She seemed to have fallen into a trance again.

I took her hands and said:

"Svetlana, darling, you mustn't take it so badly. You can't help what's happened. I'm terribly upset about it myself. After all Zaitsev was someone we knew quite closely. But what can we do? It was an accident. And I'm certain that had we been apart and not together we would have found this much more difficult to bear, but now that we are husband and wife—"

Svetlana started and seemed to come back to life again.

"Andrei, tell me," she said nervously, "did anyone see you leave my room last night?"

"No," I said, surprised at her unexpected question. "But would it matter if they had? We're not going to make a secret of it, are we? But for this unfortunate

accident surely we'd have told everybody today that we were going to get married."

"No, not that!" cried Svetlana, snatching her hands away. Then, as though frightened at the hastiness of her action, she added more composedly, "Andrei, dear, let's wait a little. There'll be talk, gossip."

"Gossip? What are you talking about, Svetlana?"

"I should like to celebrate our wedding, but not in this pitch-black arctic night," she went on, ignoring my question. "Let's wait just a bit longer, the sun will shine again, spring will come."

I rose, my cheeks ablaze.

"Do you regret what you have done?" I asked quietly.

"No, not at all," replied Svetlana, coming closer to me. "Only let's wait a little, so that I can get used to the idea. Haven't I given you proof? Am I not with you, after all?"

There was a knock at the door. Svetlana drew away from me and called:

"Come in!"

It was Agafonov. He was holding a newspaper.

"I was looking for you, Andrei Vladimirovich," he said. "Take a look at this. It's just arrived."

He handed me a copy of the works newspaper. I saw on the front page a telegram of congratulations from the minister to Kramov. The telegram referred to the success scored by the western sector—the completion of two-thirds of the work.

"Damn it!" I cried. "But we've completed as much."

I gave Svetlana, who was reading the paper over my shoulder, a questioning and perplexed glance.

"Kramov may have finished the last few metres a day earlier," she said. "Or even a few hours and so the works had time to inform Moscow."

Fast work, I thought, extraordinarily fast work, that!

Yes, I was mistaken about Svetlana.

To this day I don't know whether love was responsible for the new relationship between us or whether Svetlana wanted to burn her bridges and begin a new life, the life I was calling her to. Or whether she had hoped that after that night I would change.

I really don't know. But one way or another it soon became clear to me that Svetlana was as distant from me as ever.

It seemed to me at first that on that night, illumined by the northern lights, all our problems were settled.

I thought that there had been an end to the conflict in Svetlana's soul, which I did not always understand, that the things I cherished and loved in her had triumphed and that now we were to be together for ever.

But I was mistaken. Svetlana had given herself to me, but her doing so was not the natural result of a mind thoroughly made up. Afterwards she at once recoiled in fright, drifting far away from me in spirit.

But that too was something I realized much later.

At the time I was crushed by her behaviour.

At first I tried to persuade myself that her aloofness was a result of the shock she had received from Zaitsev's death.

But no, it wasn't that. Gradually it dawned on me that in giving herself to me physically she had not come closer to me in any other way.

I felt certain she was not aware of it herself. I believed that on that night when she held me in her arms she was sincere. She herself thought that everything between us was settled for good. But then she had taken fright.

Whenever after that night I came into her room I felt that an invisible but insurmountable wall stood between us. The days that followed were torture to me. Dozens of times during the day I sought for an oppor-

tunity of being alone with Svetlana but she avoided me. When I went into my room I turned the key noisily in the lock, stamped my feet as I went in and began moving the chairs about in the hope that she would hear and call me. But she gave no sign of wanting to see me. When she could not possibly avoid me—in the tunnel or at the frequent production conferences we held at my office before a change of shift—I tried to catch her eye but she averted her gaze.

And then a steady, agonizing thought began to gnaw at my mind again: it was all Kramov's fault. I had been mistaken in thinking that she did not care for him. I had been too obtuse. I had been deceived by the casual way in which she had listened to Kramov that day in the mountains.

No, she was not indifferent to him. In giving herself to me she had realized that she had made a choice and that had frightened her.

Oh, how I hated Kramov those days! There were moments when I felt I could have killed him, trampled him to death—it's queer to admit now that I had such savage thoughts but it really was so. At other times I was obsessed by no less foolish thoughts—to go over to Kramov and have it out with him. I was ready to implore him, yes, implore him to give up Svetlana, to prove to him that he did not need her, that they were different, altogether different people, that for him Svetlana was nothing but a passing infatuation, that he would forget her once the tunnel had been built and he had gone to live among other people, with other women, while Svetlana meant everything to me.

Now that some time has passed I can see things in a different light.

I think that had I then given less thought to Kramov and more to Svetlana, had I been more sensitive to her wishes the gulf between us might have been bridged.

But that is mere speculation. What actually happened was this.

Soon we heard that there was to be an open Party meeting at the construction department. Its purpose was to examine the progress of work on the tunnel.

As the day approached I became quite frantic with worry.

Oh no, I wasn't afraid of our work being criticized: we were no longer lagging behind our plan—day after day we fulfilled it.

It was something else. I was constantly haunted by thoughts of Kramov, I longed to unmask him. After Zaitsev's somewhat mysterious death this longing grew stronger still.

I would like to have consulted Trifonov but he had been away for over a week: his son, who lived in a nearby town, had been taken dangerously ill.

The night before the meeting I could not sleep. I felt an urge to speak to Svetlana about what I wanted to do. Quietly, taking care that no one should notice me, I went along the corridor and tapped on her door.

"Who's there?" Svetlana called.

"It's me," I whispered. "Can I come in for a minute? I want to talk to you about something."

Svetlana opened the door and stepped back into the darkness.

"Wait, don't put on the light," she said. "What's the matter?"

"Oh, nothing special. Don't worry. I just felt I had to talk to you."

I heard Svetlana bump into a chair, she must have been putting some clothes on in the dark.

"Come here, but quietly," she said. "Take my hand. This way."

We sat down.

"There is going to be a Party meeting tomorrow, Svetlana," I said. "I can't keep quiet any longer. I'm quite certain that Kramov's to blame for Zaitsev's death. Besides, I have grounds to think that he has yet another death on his conscience. That is something that happened earlier, during the war. I'd like both of us to have the same opinion on the matter. I'm not asking you to make any speeches, but I have to know that you're on my side and that Kramov is our common enemy. Then it'll be easier, a hundred times easier for me to fight."

"And is that what has brought you here in the middle of the night?" asked Svetlana.

"But it's important, terribly important, can't you see?"

For a long time Svetlana did not answer.

"I beg you, I implore you not to carry out your intention," she said at last. "He's ... he's strong. He knows what he wants and he'll give no quarter to those who stand in his way. Oh, Andrei, you don't know him. Do drop this senseless fight. Why have you begun it? What for?"

"I have no intention of stopping half-way. I see something wrong and I'm going to fight against it, whatever the cost."

"Drop this high-flown talk, Andrei," Svetlana said. "Fight, truth, wrong, unmask.... How can you?"

"Listen, Svetlana," I said firmly, "let's talk seriously. What is keeping us apart? Be honest with me. Maybe you really feel sorry for Kramov after all."

"No, no," she said hurriedly. "I feel sorry for you."

"But nothing threatens me, Svetlana!"

"There'll always be something threatening you, somehow...."

"I don't understand. What d'you mean by that? Is it because I'm of a quarrelsome nature? D'you mean I'll always be stirring up trouble? Is that what you mean?"

"I don't know. I don't know anything, Andrei. Except one thing: I want to live, you understand, to live a quiet, normal life. Go ahead, reproach me for it, call me a philistine, a petty bourgeois, tell me I want a smug existence. Use these words as others do, pin all kinds of labels on people who want ordinary, simple happiness."

She had misunderstood me entirely, that was clear.

"But I too want happiness, for you, for myself and for others."

"That's not true," she cried. "You're selfish, that's what you are. You don't love me, I know you don't. You love yourself and the code of life you've thought up, your pose of being a benefactor to mankind. Go away, please, I beg you!"

The large number of meetings, Party and non-Party, which are held in all corners of our country, on land and at sea, in Moscow or in the provinces, in the snow-fields or in the deserts, on farms or in factories—may all be divided into two groups.

There are meetings prompted by the exigencies of life. Those meetings are necessary to all who take part in them. They arise out of the need of each to have a say and to hear the opinion of others on matters of great consequence to all. Meetings of this nature invariably result in changes in the life of both the individual and the community. They bring a certain clarity into that life, sympathies and antipathies, grievances and triumphs assuming their true proportions.

And there are other meetings, meetings of no use to anyone, except their organizers. Nor have they really

any use for them except as a matter of routine, something to report to their superiors.

There is a stereotyped complacency and futility about such meetings.

"A motion has been put that . . . preside at the meeting. . . ."

The audience is quite indifferent. What difference does it make who is going to "preside" at a meeting nobody wants or bothers to pay any attention to? Let anyone preside. So long as he gets on with it.

The agenda is dull and uninteresting. You can tell that from the very titles of the reports: "On certain preliminary results of the campaign for speeding up the turnover. . . ." The audience is bored with the speaker—it's not his first appearance. He's the kind who never commits himself one way or another. You never know what he's for and what he's against, what he's ready to die for, what he wants to live a hundred years to see.

The speaker asks the chairman to give him an hour to speak.

"No! No! Half an hour'll do!" come cries from the audience. Now the time, that is something that matters to the audience and things get lively. But the speaker has his report written out. And he's the kind that can't change his speech as he goes along. He's used to reel-ing off his reports from sheets of paper.

"Well," says the chairman defiantly, "there is a motion to let the speaker have an hour." And he is sure to add, "Comrades, this is a serious matter."

"Well, what can you do about it, there's no way out of it but to give him an hour." The speaker begins.

The open Party meeting of the building department began at six in the evening. Twenty-three Party mem-

bers and a number of non-Party workers had assembled in the small log building that served as a meeting hall. The chairman, Sizov—Secretary of the Party organization—announced the title of the report: “On certain preliminary results achieved in the construction of the tunnel.” The speaker was Falaleyev, chief of the construction department.

The report turned out to be a routine, humdrum sort of thing. It was full of figures and statements about the “pluses and minuses in the work,” but it seemed to have no main idea and no point to it.

The speaker praised the work of the western sector but at the same time pointed out that Kramov must pay more attention to improving the living conditions of his workmen. “On the eastern sector, on the other hand,” he went on, “there was, as we all know, some trouble which might be attributed to the lack of experience of our young engineers, but things have been set right.”

The audience was quite bored although the speaker dealt with matters which were vitally important to all present. But Falaleyev spoke of these matters with the same expressions and the same few hundred words and phrases which speakers so often use all over the country. The audience knew he would be dragging it all out to last an hour. And when he had finished there would be more talk—there are always people eager to take the floor and use the same words over again, only reshuffling them. For one reason or another, the audience was bored.

I was sitting next to Agafonov on a bench near the wall. The speaker’s words seemed to be coming to me through a cotton-wool filter.

That morning when I saw Svetlana in the tunnel I had said to her, “I won’t speak.” She had smiled at me and pressed my hand.

But having taken this decision I by no means felt the peace of mind I longed for so much after my night of tormenting thoughts and doubts. I was glad, of course, that something which would further complicate my relations with Svetlana had been removed, but my joy was not as great as I had expected it to be.

So there I was at the meeting listening absent-mindedly to Falaleyev.

But the longer I listened to him and the more I tried to concentrate on what he was saying, the stronger my irritation grew. Why did he have to speak in such a boring way? Couldn't he see that he was not getting his speech across to the audience?

The discussion began. Like the report it was vague and dull.

And here am I sitting and saying nothing, I thought. Yet there is much I could say but I'm keeping my mouth shut. There is a scoundrel in our midst, among us Communists, yet I'm keeping quiet about it. In other words, I'm shielding him. I'm becoming an accessory.

The thoughts I had tried so hard to drive out of my mind came rushing back.

Now, at this wearisome meeting, I felt more keenly than at any time during the previous few days how wrong it was of me to keep silent. I felt as though a fire had broken out nearby and while these people were sitting in the hall, busy with their everyday affairs, I, the only one who knew of it, was keeping silent.

Incidentally, I'm not telling the whole truth. At such moments I hated Kramov for other reasons. I thought of him as a rival, as the man who had come between me and Svetlana.

After three people had spoken no one else asked for the floor. That meant, according to established order, that the discussion had been a failure. The organizers

would then be given a good scolding for both the report, which had not contained "sufficient self-criticism" and had not led to a proper "discussion," and for the way the meeting had been run. The number of speakers should, according to required standards for such meetings, have been no less than six or eight. But no one wanted to speak.

Whereupon the chairman, having made use of all such methods of persuasion as: "Well, comrades, surely some of you have something to say," or "This is an important matter, comrades," or "Speak up, comrades," or "Surely there are some points you'd like to take up, comrades"—cleared his throat and said, "In that case, comrades, the following draft resolution—"

At that very moment I rose, raised my hand and said in a loud voice:

"May I make a contribution?"

"We've had enough, the discussion's closed!" shouted someone from the audience, disappointed that the meeting was not being adjourned but was to go on.

The chairman, however, gratified that somebody at last had made a move, at once demurred.

"The discussion is still open. We're ready to hear other speakers. Comrade Arefyev, go ahead, you have the floor."

I went on to the platform and stood at the side of the chairman's table.

"Comrades," I began, surprised at my own composure. "As you know I am still a young Communist, or, to be more exact, a candidate member of the Party. I have come to this meeting with many thoughts and hesitations weighing heavily on my mind. Today, comrades, I wish to speak about the work on the western sector."

"Eastern, you mean," came a voice from the hall. Someone must have thought I had made a slip.

"No, comrades," I said. "I'm not going to speak today about my own sector. I want to speak about the western sector, and mainly about the man who is in charge of it, Comrade Kramov."

The audience at once lapsed into silence.

The hum of subdued voices which had persisted all through the meeting now ceased. Evidently the comrades present at the meeting felt that they were going to hear something on which they would have to take a definite stand, a stand for or against. Many turned to look at Kramov. He was sitting, pipe in hand, in the second row, at the end of a bench. When I mentioned his name he leaned his head back slightly and raised his brows in marked surprise.

"So that you can understand what I'm talking about, comrades, so that you can understand how I feel, let me explain my attitude to Comrade Kramov from the very outset."

Chairman Sizov made a motion for me to stop and turning to the audience said good-naturedly:

"Judging from the way he's started, Comrade Arefyev will want more than the allotted ten minutes for his speech."

He looked at me again and asked:

"How much time will you need, Comrade Arefyev?"

I don't know why, but I found the question offensive. "I haven't gone beyond my time limit yet, have I? Please don't interrupt," I said rudely.

The chairman shrugged.

"Go on," he said.

I paused for a moment to regain my self-control. And when I did I went on speaking as calmly as I had begun.

"Again I wish to say, comrades, that I must tell you all this so that you can understand what is going on in my heart."

And I began to tell the meeting how I had made Kramov's acquaintance and how much I had liked him at first. Then I spoke of the help Kramov had given our sector when we had had trouble with the compressor.

"I admired Kramov from the first. He seemed a real hero to me, a front-liner, a man of great will power, charm, courage—"

"Comrade Arefyev," Falaleyev interrupted sharply from the platform, "let's keep to the agenda. What's all this romantic nonsense? 'Admire,' you say, 'charm,' you say, Kramov's not a girl."

Someone guffawed.

"Stop interrupting me!" My anger rose again. "You've been chewing the cud here, and I—I'm trying to lay bare my heart."

A murmur of disapproval rose in the hall.

Sizov called the meeting to order, tapping with his pencil on the water carafe, and said:

"Comrade Arefyev, as I predicted, has taken up all his time without really coming to the point. I propose we allow him more time. Comrade Arefyev is obviously a little excited."

Silence followed these words, and I had the feeling that the audience was in two minds as to how to take my speech.

"So he can go on, it seems," said Sizov and looking at me added, "but make it short."

"All right," I said. "Comrades, I was mistaken about Kramov. And so are you mistaken about him. He's not the man we took him for."

"What is he then?" someone shouted. "An animal of some sort?"

"He is an outsider in our midst, one who despises his fellow-men. Look at the way his workmen live. They live in a barracks and sleep on wooden bunks, and there is not even enough bed linen to go around. He

plays up to his men but—he won't do anything to open a first-aid station on his sector. Why should he? A first-aid station, decent dwellings, bed linen, none of that figures in reports on the fulfilment of the plan. You won't find any Party members in his sector. He doesn't want any, they'd only interfere with his plans. He picks men with tainted records so that it will be easier for him to hold them in his grip. He trains people to be loyal not to their jobs but to his own person; some he tempts with money, others by holding a whip over them and others by presenting them with an autographed picture of himself."

I stopped. I had worked myself into a state of great excitement, so that I had to gasp for breath and my throat was dry.

The atmosphere in the hall became electric.

"He is introducing methods that are completely alien to the Soviet spirit and the Soviet system," I cried. "These are not Soviet methods, comrades!"

"Give us facts," I heard Falaleyev say.

"Facts? I'm not an inspector. I haven't been investigating Kramov's doings. I am merely telling you what I feel."

There was a murmur of disapproval in the hall. Someone shouted:

"Give us facts, we want facts!"

I looked at the audience in dismay. I was upset and quite taken aback by the hostile reaction of the meeting.

"There are facts that will be brought to light," I said with renewed force. "And meanwhile I want to ask Comrade Kramov two questions: Why did he send Zaitsev to the works that night? And secondly: What decorations had he won in the war?"

I hesitated for a few seconds on the platform, then stepped down into the hall. A dead silence greeted me.

Now, after so much time has gone by, I can describe that meeting more or less calmly and see myself with another's eyes.

But at that time my thoughts were in a jumble. One thought hammered in my brain: my comrades had not understood me. I had completely failed to win them over to my side.

Falaleyev asked for the floor.

"Well," he began slowly, leaning with both his hands on the rostrum, "we've all heard Comrade Arefyev's speech. If you can call this hotch-potch a speech. He's put two questions to Kramov. But now I'd like to ask Arefyev a question. Who has done more tunnelling day after day, Kramov or he? In other words, which of the two men has done his duty to his country? Arefyev or Kramov? There's no denying, comrades, that Kramov has his faults. He has not been giving sufficient attention to the living conditions of the workers, for example. Why, I've criticized him for that myself. I might add that he's perhaps a bit rough in his manner with the personnel of—what shall I say?—the middle category. And he'll get his share of criticism for that, too. But what Arefyev said, comrades, why, that's plain slander. He deserves to be expelled from the Party for downright demagoguery like that."

He slapped the edge of the platform, swept the room with his eyes and returned to his place on the platform.

I sat beside Agafonov with bowed head. Then Kramov asked for the floor.

On hearing his voice I looked up and saw him calmly walk to the rostrum, stand quietly for a second and then smile. It was the smile I knew so well—broad, candid, blue-eyed.

"Well, well, comrades," he began quietly, "to start with I must answer those two questions Andrei Arefyev asked me."

Kramov's engaging smile and the fact that he had referred to me not as "Arefyev" or "Comrade Arefyev" but in that friendly way as "Andrei Arefyev" at once reduced the tension in the hall and disposed the audience favourably towards Kramov.

"The first question was why I sent Zaitsev to his death. I understand Arefyev. He's hinting that, true to my inhuman nature, I sent the man regardless of the warning we'd been given. Yes, comrades, I did send Zaitsev regardless of the warning. One of my men had had a heart-attack. We hadn't the medicine we needed on hand. There wasn't a regular driver around—I'd sent mine to the settlement the evening before. But Zaitsev had been learning to drive and we'd been doing all we could to help him become a skilled driver. Seeing that a man's life was at stake Zaitsev himself volunteered to go to the works for the medicine. He went because he was a Soviet arctic man worthy of the name. He died doing his duty, saving the life of a fellow-worker. All honour to his memory."

Kramov paused impressively.

"Now for the second question," he said looking straight down the hall, "about my war decorations. I don't know what's behind that question, but I'll answer it. My decorations are an Order of the Patriotic War, and a Red Banner."

"Where were you at the front?" I cried, getting on my feet and starting forward.

"I served on various staffs," replied Kramov with a shrug. "I hope you don't see anything reprehensible in that?"

By then people were booing and shouting at me from all sides. I sat down.

"There is no need for me to defend myself," Kramov said, "because I understand Andrei well. I know what prompted him to speak as he did."

"What are you hinting at?" I shouted.

"I'll explain. Imagine, comrades, a young engineer who arrives at a remote and difficult construction job. Well, we were all young once. Imagine an engineer who has just graduated with honours as, for example, our Comrade Arefyev did. There are two types of young people: one is the type that on finishing his education realizes that he has only laid the foundation of his knowledge, that he still has much to learn, that he has to improve himself, to mature, and, the main thing, to be modest."

Kramov's air indicated that neither the charges I had made against him nor what he was saying now troubled him in the least. He was merely the patient, well-wishing, experienced elder comrade giving advice.

"But then there is a different type of young man," Kramov went on, "coming straight from the Institute with an excellent record but imagining himself a sort of MacAllan, born to unite continents. This type creates a sort of cult of his own personality, comrades. A Kellermann utopia. But life has some hard knocks in store for those little MacAllans."

Approving laughter rang through the hall.

"Nobody cares a snap for their bloated egoism and their high pretensions," Kramov went on. "Very soon they find themselves up a blind alley. Reality shows that it is easier to link two continents in your mind than to set up a compressor in unfamiliar conditions, or to drive a heading in the mountain side. But the Party and the country demand from such comrades concrete, routine work, not high-flown speeches.

"And so there comes a day when a young comrade of this type has to swallow his pride—let's call a spade a spade—his ambitious pride, and go for advice to an ordinary rank-and-file engineer who does not shine but who has built a few tunnels in his time. And that is

what happened in this particular case, as Engineer Arefyev has told you.

“Well, the young engineer comes for advice and the engineer who is older both in years and experience gives it—that’s quite a usual thing. That’s how it seemed to me, that’s how it would have seemed to ninety-nine out of a hundred in Arefyev’s place.

“But Arefyev is not one of the ninety-nine. He’s the exception. Having got advice and used it he harbours a grudge against the man who gave it. For that man could not help being a witness to the helplessness of that arctic MacAllan.

“Furthermore, Kramov is building his tunnel at high speed. Arefyev is marking time. How would ninety-nine out of a hundred young engineers account for that to themselves? Very simply. Kramov has more experience, so the thing to do is to learn from him and catch up with him. But that’s a humiliating thought for the one man who is an exception. So he invents another reason, another explanation.

“What does he care if that explanation casts a slur on an older comrade who had given him a helping hand in trouble? Anything will do if only it serves to redeem his own good name, his exceptional personality, if only it will heap dirt and eliminate the man whom that exceptional personality regards as his rival.

“I’m not speaking with indignation. I don’t feel particularly offended. I’m merely stating facts,” said Kramov, pausing to take a sip of water. “Comrade Arefyev is young. He is a candidate member of the Party. He has to be guided. That is the business of the Party organization. He is too conceited. He needs to be brought down from his Kellermann utopia to solid Soviet earth. And the sooner, the better, while he’s still young and can be influenced.”

Several people applauded as Kramov left the rostrum with dignity.

And then, without asking for the floor or going to the rostrum, Falaleyev rose to speak again.

"This is sheer liberalism," he exclaimed. "What Kramov has just said smacks of the non-resistance to evil doctrine. Arefyev has made a most disgusting speech. He has slandered a comrade by resorting to demagoguery, even political speculation. I propose that the question of Arefyev's conduct at this meeting be taken up by the Party Bureau and the correct conclusions be drawn from his anti-Party demagogic speech."

He resumed his seat.

The hall was in a terrible uproar. At first it was impossible to make out on whose side sympathies chiefly lay. But soon it became clear that the overwhelming majority were with Kramov, though against Falaleyev's proposal.

Suddenly the bass voice of Agafonov, who till then had remained silent, rose above the din.

"That's wrong," he said.

Everyone fell silent.

"What exactly is wrong?" asked Falaleyev, leaning forward over the table.

"What you said about raising the question of Arefyev's conduct, that's what's wrong," said Agafonov from his seat.

"Explain why, then!"

"I can do that," began Agafonov, but everyone called:

"Get up, get up! Go to the rostrum."

"I can get up," boomed Agafonov, "but there's no need to go to the rostrum." He rose to his feet. "We've heard Comrade Arefyev say he's a young Communist. Well, 'young' is all right for him—he's young in years,

too. But take *me*, comrades: though I'm old I haven't caught up with Arefyev yet because I'm not in the Party."

There was some good-humoured laughter. Standing near the wall, Agafonov went on:

"This is what I think: maybe it's not fitting for me, a 'youngster,' to speak my mind before my elders and betters, but after all, why shouldn't I speak? I'm sixty. I've seen a bit of this world, I've knocked about a good deal and seen folk come and go, you can't wipe that off the slate. Anyway, that's not the point."

Agafonov paused in an effort to get to the main thing he wished to say.

"I see two men," he said glancing round the room. "Arefyev and Comrade Kramov. We had a hard time catching up with Comrade Kramov. He'd tunnel a metre and a half, we'd do a metre, and when we'd be tunnelling a metre and a half, he'd do two metres. Arefyev took this very much to heart, we all saw that. But that's not the point.

"Well, he's a young man, just getting to know life. But I'm an old bird, an old stager, a pebble that's been rubbed smooth. You can't trick me. Nor is this my first year in the mountains. Still, like Arefyev, I couldn't understand what the trouble was on our sector. So I decided to go over to the western sector and see for myself how things were. I did it on my own—a sort of private visit, because those commissions that come to us have taught us how to throw dust in people's eyes. Exchange of experience they call it—"

Falaleyev burst into loud sarcastic laughter, but no one joined him.

"When I ran into Kramov one day I asked him, 'May I come and learn a bit of sense at your sector?'" Agafonov continued. "'Why, certainly, old boy,' he says,

'come over tomorrow evening if you like.' That's what you said, didn't you, Comrade Kramov?"

Kramov nodded.

"I went to the entrance of the tunnel and there I saw Mitka Dronov. We worked as drillers at the mine three years back. Well, he saw me too and said, 'Hullo, Fyodor, old man, what's brought you here?' Well, I didn't want to explain my business to him, he's a good-for-nothing, that Mitka: he left the mine, went and worked at the fisheries, didn't get along there either and went off somewhere else. But Mitka sticks to me like a leech. 'Let's go into the barracks,' he said, 'come and have a look at the way we live.' Well, what the hell, I thought, and off we went."

Sizov again tapped his pencil against the carafe and said:

"Keep to the point, please, Comrade Agafonov."

"Let him go on, let him speak!" voices came from the audience, though Sizov had not warned Agafonov that he was exceeding the time limit.

It was hard to believe that these people who were calling for Agafonov to go on were the same who an hour before had been waiting impatiently for the meeting to end.

"Well, we went into the barracks," Agafonov continued, as though he had not heard either Sizov or the shouts of the audience, "there I saw how badly the people were living. But that's not the point. We sat down and got talking. Then Mitka pulled out a bottle of vodka from somewhere and we got to reminiscing about old friends who worked at the mine. Well, I took a drop—couldn't resist it."

Agafonov parted his hands and let them fall limply to his sides.

"Comrades," Falaleyev's voice rose above the laughter in the hall, "isn't it high time to put a stop to all

this? We know Agafonov is a working man, he's no public speaker. We've let him have his say, we didn't interrupt him. But this, after all, is a Party meeting, Comrade Agafonov, and you're spinning some drunken yarn."

"And you, comrade, have been dead sober all your life," Agafonov snapped at him, "a sort of angel."

This remark evoked loud laughter and applause.

"Though I don't belong to the Party, I'm not one to waste the time of the meeting with something that's not to the point," said Agafonov, when order had been restored. "I want to tell you what Dronov, an old mate of mine, told me, and what's more, after he had had no more than a glass or two. He told me all about Kramov, the way he makes his workmen sweat. Moreover, he told me that Kramov had ordered him to keep me out of the tunnel. He didn't want me to go sniffing around—"

Falaleyev banged his fist down on the table.

"I demand that this slanderous talk, this mud-slinging at honest Soviet workers be stopped at once. First Arefyev and now Agafonov. It's gone beyond Kramov. This has become a slander on the Soviet system itself. Do you want us to believe that it is possible to exploit the workers under the very nose of the Party and trade-union organizations—and to go unpunished for it?"

He paused, breathing heavily.

A sudden change came over Agafonov. His eyes turned bloodshot. With clenched fists, he lurched blindly up to the platform.

"Agafonov, Comrade Agafonov, what's the matter?" said Sizov in alarm, tapping the table-top with the glass stopper from the carafe. Falaleyev slowly shrank to the back of his chair; it looked as if both he and the chair were about to tip over.

On reaching the table Agafonov gave Falaleyev a hard, penetrating look, swung round to face the

audience and in a quiet voice that grew stronger as he went on said:

"Look at these hands. With them I throttled the enemies of the Soviets during the war. And he tells me—that—pup—I've been walking this earth for sixty years now. I've seen all sorts of people. I've seen self-seeking men with Party cards in their pockets, and I've seen heroes who've shoved their bodies in front of enemy machine-guns. I've seen prattlers and grabbers, and I've seen those who have given their heart's blood for Soviet power. I've seen a thing or two, I tell you. In some collective farm there are rotters and people are going about half-starved, yet some clever fellows say, 'Hush, don't criticize, that's a slander on the system.' Some chief goes to extremes, waves the big stick, doesn't care a damn for his workmen—but you mustn't touch him, oh no, that would be going against the principle of one-man management. We know the sort of man who thinks he's Soviet power itself and covers up his own misdeeds with talk about principles. As for me, it's not to toady or lick anybody's boots that I've got up to speak in front of the Party, I can tell you that."

It was hard to imagine that the uproar that followed came from a mere handful of people. There was loud hand-clapping and shouts of "That's right. That's the stuff. Hand it to 'em, Agafonov."

"Now about Comrade Kramov," Agafonov continued when the noise had died down. "I am not prepared to speak at this meeting. I had no idea that things would take this turn. But deep in my heart I know that Andrei Arefyev is right. And I'll say more: Arefyev's a real man and the workmen like him. Well, that's all."

He walked back to his place.

For some minutes the men sitting on the platform were in a state of obvious confusion. Sizov, Falaleyev

and the Secretary put their heads together and exchanged whispers. Falaleyev was drumming loudly on the table with his fingers.

At last Sizov rose.

"Well, comrades," he said calmly, "most of us here are Party members of long standing and have been to a good many meetings. We know that sometimes a speaker will get up and lead the meeting entirely astray."

An angry murmur rose from the audience. Sizov raised his voice.

"There may be some elements of well-founded criticism in what Arefyev and Agafonov have told us. But let us get back to the main purpose of our meeting. This meeting was not called to sit in judgement on Kramov. Of course no one can forbid a Communist to criticize another Communist. But I don't think Arefyev had the right to speak as he did today, making a serious political charge against Kramov with no facts to support it, and, what's more, putting out some dark hints. Agafonov has let himself be carried away by Arefyev. We know Agafonov as a splendid workman, but I regret to say he's not a man of mature political views. Comrades, your passions have been roused by unfounded and, I would say, demagogic statements, but if you cool down and look at things soberly you will see that neither Arefyev nor Agafonov has brought any real charge against Kramov, nothing except surmises based on intuition, on a subjective interpretation of the facts and, what's more, on talks with a half-drunk man. But, comrades, when we are considering a personal matter we must strictly observe the law, that is what our Party teaches us. I think we should leave this matter to the Bureau and meanwhile go on with our meeting in a calm, organized manner and keep to the agenda. Let me remind you what is on the agenda." Sizov glanced at a sheet of paper lying on the table

before him. “‘On certain preliminary results achieved in the construction of the tunnel.’ Does anyone else wish to take the floor?”

“Yes,” a voice that was very familiar to me came from the back of the room. I turned round.

I saw Trifonov walking up the aisle, with his slow, steady gait.

I was so delighted that I half rose, I wanted to dash up to him but on second thought sat down and watched him as he made his way to the rostrum.

Trifonov took his place at the rostrum and without any sort of introduction said in a quiet voice:

“Yesterday some of the older Communists gathered at the Regional Party Committee. After the meeting Baulin came up to me and asked, ‘What’s the name of that young fellow who’s in charge of a sector at the tunnel?’ I said, ‘That’s Arefyev.’ ‘Well,’ said Baulin, ‘tell Comrade Arefyev that he was right and that I, the Secretary of the Regional Party Committee, was wrong.’ Well, I’m telling this now to Comrade Arefyev, do you hear me, Comrade Arefyev?”

It was very quiet in the hall. The audience could not understand what Trifonov was referring to though of course they all knew who Baulin was.

“You don’t understand what this is all about?” asked Trifonov. “Neither did I at first. When you’re puzzled about something the right thing to do is to ask. So I asked, ‘What were you wrong about, Comrade Baulin?’ ‘I was wrong for thinking in the old way,’ he replied. ‘That young fellow burst into my office,’ he said. ‘He’s a candidate member of the Party. He asked for my help in the question of building houses for his workmen. And I replied by lecturing him on the importance of plans and such things. But when that young man had said a few rude things and gone away I realized that he was right. It’s there that the strength of our people

lies—in young fellows like that who fight for the interests of the Party, of the people, without regard to rank or person. Apologize to him in my name and tell him I'm not such a bureaucrat as all that.'”

“He gave instructions that the houses should be started the very next day,” I shouted.

“I wasn't told anything about that,” said Trifonov, without looking my way. “Now, comrades, I want to ask your advice on the matter. The Party tells us there are many shortcomings in our work. We're engaged on a big job and we've already done much, but there are shortcomings and serious ones at that. In agriculture, for instance, and in other fields as well. You've all read what's been in the papers lately. We've got to eradicate these shortcomings. Our Central Committee and the Government, all the best elements in the Party, are eager to do that. But there are some who do not want to do that. Who are these people? Enemies? Foreign agents? I don't think so. Yet they've been doing a good deal of harm. They find life easier and more to their liking if these shortcomings remain as they are. Such a state of things suits them better, gives them less trouble. If a man of that sort finds himself in the position of a collective-farm chairman or, let's go a bit higher, of District Party Secretary, he doesn't live for communism, for the people who've entrusted him with the job, but for his chiefs. But what do his chiefs, bad chiefs, want? Reports, percentages, indices, but how those indices have been got together is not their affair. But mind you don't get yourself in trouble with the law, for then these chiefs will drop you like a hot potato.

“And these fellows, these gasbags, have an easy life. You try and ask one of them, ‘D'you happen to know how they build tunnels abroad? Maybe there's something to be learned from them.’ And that fellow will begin kicking up some noise. And you tell him, ‘What

are you kicking up all that noise for—I'm not telling you to import capitalism.' 'It's all the same to me!' he yells. 'I'm the smartest fellow in the world. Everything I do is clever and right. I'm a 100% patriot and you're a cosmopolitan. Down with you!'

"And the simple truth is that the fellow finds it to his benefit to remain an ignoramus; it gives him less to worry about. He doesn't care a rap whether his lathes or machines are producing less for the benefit of society. Why, he snaps his fingers at that!

"And now, comrades, the Party has declared war on such types, that's clear to everybody. And it's a serious war. But they're a cunning lot, these types. Now they've joined up with the Party in criticizing. 'We're with the Party, we stand with the Party. But in their hearts they're hoping that's just 'another campaign,' 'another slogan' and that 'it'll pass.' They want to convince themselves that we're out for slogans, and not really for what they stand for.

"And now, comrades, let's all think and consider what is happening right here at this meeting. Our workers know Arefyev, his actions are before the eyes of all."

With these words Trifonov turned to Kramov who was now sitting in the front row, and asked:

"What can you say for yourself, Comrade Kramov?"

Kramov sprang to his feet.

"I'm a member of the Communist Party and a Soviet engineer!" his voice rang out in the silence. "And you, you're a phrasemonger. I respect your Party record but I object to you questioning me like a public prosecutor. What have the things you've been saying got to do with me?"

With each word Kramov lost a little of his composure.

"I treated Arefyev like a younger brother, a son!" he shouted. "I've covered up his ignorance in engineering. I took care of him when my driver brought him from the 'washer' dead drunk, I've spared his authority...."

He sat down breathing heavily.

The colour rushed to my cheeks.

"Arefyev? Dead drunk? Brought from the 'washer'?" asked Trifonov. "Is that true, Arefyev?" he asked me, his voice rising for the first time. "Is that true?"

What could I say?

"Yes, it's true, Pavel Kharitonovich," I said quietly.

There was a stir in the hall.

"Have you finished, Comrade Trifonov?" asked Sizov. Trifonov paused a moment.

"Yes, I've finished," he said, and resumed his seat.

"Well, comrades," said Sizov dispassionately, "I have every ground for repeating my proposal that the Bureau deal with this matter. And now does anyone else wish to speak on the main question on the agenda? No? Then we'll listen to the reading of the draft resolution."

I drove back to my sector in a lorry, sitting next to the driver. I had no illusions as to what had happened at the meeting. I realized I had made a mess of things. My speech had been childish, my arguments unfounded, they could hardly have been taken seriously even if Sizov and Falaleyev had not intervened.

Yet my failure at the meeting, the inevitable talk with Svetlana that lay ahead and the impending inquiry in the Bureau did not prevent me feeling a sense of joy.

I knew now that I had loyal friends who recognized the truth when they saw it and would not let me down in the struggle.

I was now aware that my struggle against Kramov was no mere private feud and that there were others who shared my views: Baulin, Trifonov, Agafonov, Vasily Semyonovich at the meteorological station. These were my friends today. Tomorrow there would be others, many others. And, strange as it might seem, after the fiasco at the meeting I felt renewed strength in me, making me eager to carry on the fight at all costs.

I decided to talk things over at once with Trifonov and Agafonov, to tell them of my silly experience at the "washer," and all I knew about Kramov that I had so far kept to myself, thinking my clash with him a personal matter. Was it facts they needed? All right, I'd produce the facts. I'd get the facts of Kramov's behaviour at the front—I was certain that Kramov and that major were one and the same man. I was convinced that discretion and prudence had prevented Vasily Semyonovich from revealing the major's true name to me.

Kramov had the same decorations as that major. To my question as to where he had served Kramov had replied: on various staffs. But chief of divisional intelligence—that was a staff job too. Everything fitted.

The thing to do was to get in touch with Vasily Semyonovich at once. And if I were to convince him that my question was not one of idle curiosity he would not hide the major's true name from me any longer. And from the way he told the story it was obvious that he hated the major no less vigorously than I hated Kramov.

When I returned to the sector I discovered that neither Trifonov nor Agafonov had got back. There was a light in Svetlana's window. For a moment I felt something like a weight pressing on my shoulders, but I shook it off and went into the office without going to see her. I took up the receiver of the telephone that now

connected the sector with the meteorological station, and turned the handle.

It was a long time before I got a reply from the mountain top. At last someone answered and I asked impatiently for Vasily Semyonovich.

"Vasily Semyonovich," I said, speaking right into the receiver and trying to put as much conviction into my words as possible, "what was the name of that major? I'm not asking merely out of curiosity, you know. His name wasn't Antonov, was it? Why don't you want to tell me the truth? No one will know that you told me, no one. His name was Kramov, wasn't it? Kramov."

There was a few seconds' silence at the other end of the line.

"Kramov?" repeated Vasily Semyonovich at last. "Why Kramov? What's the point anyway?"

"The point is that the man's here," I shouted desperately. "It was Kramov. He was an intelligence officer and he's got the same decorations. He's working down here now, building the tunnel. Kramov. He's middle-aged, rather thin and has blue eyes—"

"No, Arefyev, it's a mistake," he said. "the other man's name was Antonov, Victor Petrovich Antonov, a tall, brown-eyed man."

I had no reason to doubt Vasily Semyonovich. So it was not Kramov. The decorations and the rank were a sheer coincidence.

"Well, excuse me, Vasily Semyonovich," I said, crest-fallen.

"But what's happened?"

"I'll tell you another time. Next time we meet. I'm sorry I bothered you."

I hung up the receiver and when I turned slowly to the door I saw Svetlana standing there. I had not heard her enter.

"So you did speak at the meeting," she said, looking me straight in the eyes.

"Yes, I did," I said resolutely, "and it was a failure. Kramov turned all my arguments against me. The matter will be taken up by the Bureau."

"So I was right!" she cried. "Why didn't you listen to me?"

She turned on her heel and left the office.

I did not go after her, for I had nothing to say to her. I went to my room and lay down.

Suddenly the sound of hasty footsteps reached my ears and I heard the creaking of Svetlana's door. I was lying on my bed near the thin partition wall between our two rooms. I could make out the words spoken in a quiet voice.

"Don't turn on the light, Svetlana Alexeyevna. It's me, Kramov. Pull the blind down first. I don't want to be seen here."

My heart leaped to my mouth. I could hear Svetlana cross the room.

"Don't run away," said Kramov firmly. "I told you once that you can't run away from yourself. I've come only for a few minutes, but I have something important to tell you. All right, let me lower the blind. Now you can switch on the light."

The switch clicked. I heard Kramov go to the door and put up the hook.

"I'm taking these precautions for your sake. Neither of us wants any idle gossip. Sit down. That's better. Now let's get down to business. You may not know it, but Arefyev has just made a violent attack on me. But he's failed. No one supported him except that crank Agafonov and that phrasemonger Trifonov. Arefyev's conduct at this meeting will be discussed at the Bureau. He's sure to get a reprimand."

I lay motionless as though rooted to my bed, and kept saying to myself, "I'm going to jump off the bed, in a minute, and I'll go and punch him good and hard."

"It was the speech of a milksop," Kramov went on, "of a scandalmonger. Arefyev spat in my face. And I was fond of him, have done all I could to help him. You realize what this is going to cost him?"

Svetlana was silent.

"As I've told you," Kramov continued, "he'll be reprimanded by the Party. A reprimand is the least he can hope for. That'll be held against him when he applies for Party membership. As it is, the management looks upon him as a trouble-maker. During the next few years he's not likely to get any responsible post. His reputation will be damaged even if I don't make things hard for him. And why shouldn't I? That wouldn't be fair to myself."

"What do you want me to do?" asked Svetlana.

"What I want from you? I know what your relations with Arefyev are. You can't help being interested in whatever affects him. You'll have to testify to the help I gave your sector during the first few weeks of the work. Then it may also occur to some that Arefyev's actions are prompted by personal motives, that a woman is mixed up in the whole affair. I know," Kramov added hastily, "you have nothing to do with it at all. But you're the only woman at the site ... and there are two men. Besides, the three of us have often been seen together. In short, there is bound to be gossip, filth, inquiries. That's one side of the question." Kramov paced up and down the room.

"There's another side to the matter," he said, "and I don't see any reason for hiding it from you. There is a very true saying about a man's reputation which goes something like this: 'I don't know for certain whether

he stole the fur coat or whether it was stolen from him, but he's mixed up in the business somehow.' Perhaps stupid but apt. I don't want to be mixed up in any dirty business. I don't relish being involved with commissions, inquiries, investigations and so on. In such cases even an angel may be found to be growing horns. And I'm no angel. The tunnel will soon be finished and then I shall be leaving this place. And certainly I don't want to get a bad name. You see, I'm being perfectly frank with you. Then there's a third reason why you must take immediate measures to induce Arefyev to give up the whole business and prevent him from taking any more foolish steps."

The footsteps ceased. Kramov had halted. He said suddenly:

"I love you. I've loved you for a long time. I'm no slobbering little boy and I haven't pestered you with declarations of love. But now I'm telling you plainly that I love you. Perhaps this is not a very auspicious occasion for an avowal of this kind. But let us be above such things."

"Go away, Kramov," said Svetlana softly, but firmly.

But he continued:

"I understand how you feel about it, Svetlana Alekseyevna. You're in no mood to listen to me. All the same I'm going to speak. You needn't answer. I only ask you to listen. I know you well and I understand you. Better than you understand yourself. I know you want to marry Arefyev. But you won't do it. He's a real Don Quixote. And it certainly wouldn't suit you to become his Dulcinea. That would be silly. You're a woman who has her feet on the ground. And just as you are I need you. I know what I want from life. You have the gift of being versatile: naïve, kind, wise, harsh. I can teach you how to use this gift to get what you want in life. We'll be a great force together. Besides, I love you, and

I know you won't take offence at that 'besides.' I know you, and you—I began to feel this a long time ago—know and understand me. Arefyev is not the man for you, Svetlana. Under the burden of his ever noble principles you'll turn into a drudge. But with me you'll find life easy and pleasant."

"Go away, Kramov," Svetlana repeated.

"I'll go in a minute, but don't cast me in the ridiculous role of the seducer. Everything I've told you you already knew. And you'll come to a decision sooner or later. That decision is already growing on you. And it will be exactly the one I'm waiting for. And as soon as you take it you'll feel a weight off your mind. In me you'll find the experience of dozens of generations at your disposal. You'll stop tormenting yourself. There'll be an end to all that struggle in you between an imaginary good and an imaginary evil. You'll break away from the clutches of that intolerable, so-called new morality which Arefyev preaches, a morality well suited to sermons but really not a bit of good for life. And that is all I wanted to say to you, Svetlana Alexeyevna."

"Wait a minute," said Svetlana, "I want to give you some sort of an answer. All that you have told me, I knew long before. You've always talked to me that way. Always. Even when you kept silent. Even when you spoke of other things. Sometimes I've loathed you, sometimes I've despised you, I don't know which feeling was stronger. But I've despised myself as well—because I listened to you, always listened to you even when you didn't speak. To the point of pain. Now when I ought to turn you out of my room I go on listening to you. How I wish your words would disgust me! But I go on listening. Now you can go."

"Svetlana!" cried Kramov, and all his joy and triumph rang in that one word.

"Go," said Svetlana in a loud voice.

Kramov opened the door and ran straight into me.

"Go back!" I said to him.

He obeyed. I walked in after him and shut the door behind us.

Svetlana took a step forward and said in a hardly audible voice:

"Forgive me, Andrei, I can't be your wife."

I felt incredibly calm.

"Did you hear that?" I asked Kramov.

A sardonic grin appeared on his face.

"A lovers' quarrel—surely my unexpected intrusion is not the cause? I've come to discuss the question of linking up our two galleries."

"I wish to repeat to you, Kramov, that Svetlana Alexeyevna, whom I loved, whom I still love, has said she doesn't want to marry me."

"And why are you telling me this?" Kramov asked sharply, with a slight jerk of the head.

Then he suddenly smiled and gripped me by the shoulders.

"Look here, Andrei, you haven't learned to live yet. You've just lost a friend and your girl is dropping you."

I didn't shake Kramov's hands off my shoulders. Somehow I didn't feel them.

He drew them away himself and sat down at the table between Svetlana and me.

"I want to tell you, Andrei," he went on, "since you've forced this conversation on me, that Svetlana Alexeyevna is right in her own way. She's not the woman for you, nor are you the man for her. The man-and-wife relationship has its roots in the very distant past. The man went off hunting with a club over his shoulder, the woman waited for him to return. But you want to drag your woman after you to the hunt,

across hills and mountains, through the undergrowth and the thickets, in heat and frost. Few women will agree to that sort of life. Think this over, Andrei. As for me, I realized a long time ago that you're not suited to each other. Whatever there was between you was something short-lived and fleeting, at least as far as Svetlana Alexeyevna is concerned. I realized that long ago. And Svetlana Alexeyevna realized that before today, though she could not bring herself to admit it. Not even to herself. For a time she did not mind playing the huntress to her mate. But the novelty soon wore off and realism took the upper hand. You'd better face that, Andrei, whether you like it or not. And making exposures at meetings will not help you one bit."

I looked up and asked:

"Is that true, Svetlana?"

"Yes, I think it is, Andrei," she replied tonelessly. "How happy I would have been, how wonderful life would be, how proud I would be of myself if it were not true!"

"It's a lie!" I cried, bringing my fist down on the table. "It's clear to me now that it's all a lie. You're slandering yourself. And he . . . he's trying to crush you, to humiliate you."

Svetlana only shook her head sadly.

"Very well," I said. "In that case I have a question to ask you. Just one question. Do you—do you love Kramov?"

Svetlana's lips twitched and she raised her hand a little as though defending herself against me.

"I tell you what, Andrei," Kramov said in a loud voice. "Don't you think it's time you cut out all that melodramatic stuff? You idealists and humanity lovers become the cruellest of men when you are crossed in

something. I'm no altruist, still I believe in a little chivalry when it comes to women."

He came close to me.

"We must come to an understanding, Arefyev. Considering what has occurred between us, I hope you will refrain from cavalier attacks on my humble person, in public at least. Under the circumstances it would be extremely unwise on your part to go on with these attacks. You will be acting cruelly to Svetlana Alexeyevna and will be doing yourself no good. I think you understand what I mean. And now, is it a bargain?"

"How I loathe you, Kramov!" I said. "There you are standing before me and I don't see you, I only see your hypocrisy, cruelty, cowardice—"

"You—you milksop!"

"No, Kramov, no, I'm no milksop. I'm not going to try to outshout the waterfall any more. But I know whom to fight and what means to use."

"You mean to say you're turning down my offer?"

I went to the door and said:

"Get out!"

Kramov smiled.

"As far as I know," he hissed, "this is not your room. Do you wish me to go, too, Svetlana Alexeyevna?"

Svetlana shot a glance full of hatred at Kramov. Then she rushed towards me and flung her arms around me in a sort of desperation.

"It's all untrue, Andrei, it's all untrue, my dear," she whispered. "Make him go, make him leave straight away. I love you, only you. Forget what I said. Don't believe anything except that I love you and want to be with you."

I unclasped her hands with difficulty.

"Get out!" I repeated staring straight into Kramov's eyes.

He shrugged his shoulders, took a step towards the

door, halted and with a deprecating wave of the hand went out.

As he passed through the door he seemed to stoop a little and gave me a frightened look out of the corner of his eye as though he feared that I might hit him.

15

The next day brought alarming news. There was an unexpected increase of rock pressure on the timber props. It seemed that our tunnellers had struck a section of soft, disintegrating rock.

I was in the office with Svetlana when Agafonov, very much upset, reported this news.

A few minutes later we reached the opening of the tunnel. We had to walk more than half a kilometre through the gallery to reach the face. We hurried forward, squelching through puddles of water which the pumps had not managed to drain. There had been a blasting operation not long before, the ventilators were fanning fresh air up to the face and we could smell the acrid odour of explosive gases. From time to time we pressed against the damp walls to let trucks roll by on their way out.

At last we reached the face. Trifonov was already there, holding up his lamp and examining the rock that had been exposed after blasting. Yes, there was indeed cause for anxiety. The workmen were hurriedly shoring up the roof of the tunnel with wooden beams. That was a very hectic day we had, and all our personal troubles went to the winds.

The night passed without anything happening. Towards morning a routine blasting operation showed that we had passed the danger spot, and were once more in the zone of hard rock. Svetlana took over her usual

shift. I warned her to keep an eye on the soft section, which had by then been well shored up.

We heard that the western sector was also up against great difficulties. They had struck water during the tunnelling and its pressure kept increasing as work proceeded.

It was obvious that somewhere ahead of us lay a subterranean reservoir, an "accumulator" of water, which our tunnelling might burst and send water flooding the tunnel.

Twenty-four hours passed, during which we moved on twelve metres from the danger zone. At about eleven at night I went to the face to relieve Svetlana. Everything in the gallery seemed to be going smoothly. About two hundred metres from the face the drillers were busy working on the upper part of the tunnel, broadening it to fit the clearance gauge of the train which in the near future was due to run through the tunnel.

When Svetlana was ready to leave the signaller warned us there would shortly be a blasting operation and that Svetlana would have to wait a little. In accordance with regulations the drillers ceased work, and all of us pressed close to the gallery wall—the usual precaution taken during blasting.

In a few minutes the first blast sounded, then a second and a third. Mechanically, by force of habit, we counted the blasts.

Suddenly, as we waited for another blast to follow, we heard instead the sound of sliding rock, so like flowing water, and an unusually piercing noise that grew louder and louder. Then the lights went out. In the darkness we could hear the hiss of compressed air. Then came more explosions, their sound indistinct and remote.

At last there was complete silence. It was an unusually heavy and oppressive silence, broken only by the hiss of the air pipe. We stood motionless for a few

seconds, pressing against the damp, rugged walls of the tunnel. Our safety-lamps had gone out; there were only the tunnel lights. But now we all switched them on and they gleamed faintly in the pall of rock-dust that was slowly settling.

"Steady, comrades," I said quietly, "nothing terrible has happened. The explosion must have burst a tube. There's the air hissing. I'll go and see what's the matter."

"You can't go, comrade chief," said the signaller with ill-concealed anxiety.

"Why not?"

"Fifty charges were laid. Only forty-six have gone off. I counted them very carefully."

He was right—I couldn't go. Another fifteen minutes passed in agonizing waiting. There were no more explosions.

Svetlana stood beside me, leaning against the wall. When the crash had come and the air had begun to hiss and the lights had gone out she had caught hold of my arm and held on to it. Only now did I realize that she was still clinging to me.

"Compose yourself," I said, "nothing so very terrible can have happened."

She made no reply.

I gave instructions for the lamps to be extinguished. Everyone at once understood what that meant: we had to save the batteries for an emergency. My own safety-lamp was now the only source of light, hardly able to disperse the dense gloom.

"I'll go and see what's happened," I said again.

I asked Trifonov to come along with me and told the rest of the men to remain by the wall.

We walked silently in the dark towards the exit, I kept switching my lamp on and off to save the battery, and we felt our way by the rails. We knocked against

some half-loaded trucks as we passed them, and bending down to see that I had not run up against the side of the gallery I groped for the rail.

"Switch on your safety-lamp," I said to Trifonov, turning on the switch of my own. In the light of the two lamps we saw in front of us a solid wall of rock. My heart stood still. We began fumbling for an opening or slit, bruising our knees against the sharp edges of the rock fragments. There was no gap anywhere; the wall was quite solid. We realized at once that the tunnel roof had collapsed and we were cut off from the exit.

Without exchanging a word Trifonov and I examined the walls of the section where the fall had taken place. It was that dangerous section of weak rock that had given us all so much trouble before. Evidently the props had not withstood the shock caused by the nearby blasting, and had crashed. Here and there beams projected from the heap of rubble.

We turned back. After about fifty paces I stopped. We switched off our safety-lamps.

"The roof collapsed," I said.

"Aye, it collapsed," said Trifonov quietly.

My heart was thumping, I felt that if I were to speak my voice would betray my emotions.

"Damn this rock," said Trifonov as if divining my thoughts. "Tough as steel in some places and like cotton-wool in others."

"What d'you think, is it a big fall?" I asked in a low voice.

"The section of weak rock runs for about fifteen metres. If that's the ground covered by the fall we'll have to count on fifteen metres."

"But it may be more?"

"That happens sometimes," said Trifonov evasively.

"What are we going to do?"

Trifonov's tone was reproving when he spoke again.

"We'll dig—with shovels and scoops," he said. "And of course we'll get help from the outside. They won't leave us to suffocate. This sort of thing often happens in mining."

"Well, let's get back to the others," I said uncertainly.

Trifonov drew me close to himself and said:

"Listen, lad, remember you're in charge. The men look up to you. Keep your nerve, if you're a real miner."

I was silent for a moment and then said:

"Very well. Thanks. Let's go."

When we returned the others were still sitting against the walls. I switched on my safety-lamp. Its light fell on their faces.

A haulage-man by the name of Avilov sat nearest to me. His lips were parted slightly as he looked at me with fear and hope. Beside him sat Nesterov, one of the two drillers I had met when I first arrived on my sector. He looked glum, it was obvious that he expected no comfort from me. His whole look seemed to say: "Come on, let's face it—it's clear that there's been a fall. This isn't my first year of work in the mountains. I understand."

Svetlana stood apart from the others, leaning against the wall.

As the beam of light flitted swiftly across her face I caught a glimpse only of her wide-open eyes. Further on sat two drillers, several haulage-men and the signaller.

"Well, comrades," I said with forced cheerfulness, "you can stretch your legs. We've a job ahead of us. That damned section of soft rock has played a dirty trick on us, after all. The timbering's given way. There's been a slight—fall."

I had spoken slowly, stringing out phrase after phrase, trying to delay for as long as possible the utter-

ance of that word "fall," which rings so fatal in the ears of every miner. But there now it was out. Svetlana gave a faint cry.

"What we've got to do, comrades," I went on, taking no notice of her cry, "is dig a new tunnel, a narrow one, through the fallen rock. I'm certain they'll be digging from the outside and they'll reach us before we're through. But we're not going to sit here with our arms folded."

In single file we made our way to the wall of rock. Everyone was working out in his mind how much time it would take to clear the gallery of fallen rock from the outside. At least half an hour had passed since the accident. Rescue workers must have been sent for. The work, of course, must already be in full swing.

My train of thought was broken when I felt Svetlana's hand touch me. She said in a loud whisper:

"Andrei— Is this the end?"

"Don't talk nonsense, Svetlana. Everything will be all right," I answered sharply.

She was quiet.

"Halt!" I cried when we reached the place where the roof had collapsed. "Four of us—Trifonov, Nesterov, Avilov and I—will take shovels and scoops and start work. We'll drive a narrow passage through the fallen rock. The rest will examine the props and saw them down in places where the rock is quite firm. We shall need the timber to shore up our gallery."

An hour later, working with shovels and scoops, we had cut a passage of forty centimetres into the fallen rock. I quickly reckoned up that at that rate we would tunnel no more than about seven and a half metres in twenty-four hours. That actually meant that we would need to dig two days and two nights to cover the fifteen to twenty metres blocked by the fallen rock. Of

course that was what we needed if we discounted the digging that was sure to be done by our comrades from the outside. So our situation did not seem so bad after all.

However, things were not really as rosy as that. In the first place there was the possibility of there being unexploded charges in the rock, which meant that we had to work slowly and carefully. Secondly, neither of our groups—the tunnellers or those getting the props ready—could work without light. We had to switch on all our safety-lamps and after eight hours' work the batteries gave out. And finally we began to suffer from lack of oxygen.

It was strange that at the beginning I had completely overlooked that danger. I paid no attention to it even when I found it difficult to breathe and I felt my temples throbbing.

I became aware of the danger of suffocation only when the din of the work had subsided and the workers one after another had dropped their shovels. Soon it became absolutely quiet except for the sound of the rapid, laboured breathing of the men.

I suddenly realized that all work must cease. A man at work consumes more oxygen than one at rest. The horror of it: to think that to survive we must work as intensively as possible, yet work meant depriving us of the precious oxygen we needed....

And so, after cutting no more than three metres through the heap of rubble, we were compelled to lay down our tools and grope our way to the spot where we had first heard the crash of falling rock.

No one spoke.

If only I could keep my spirit, not break down, not show how really alarmed I was! With a great effort I succeeded in pulling myself together.

"Comrades," I said, "we'll have to wait. We must save our strength. Perhaps after we've rested for a while we'll be able to go back to the job—if of course we're not rescued by that time. But for the time being we'll take it easy. Try to speak and move as little as possible."

There was another spell of silence. The only sound we now heard was the hiss of escaping air coming from a tube as before. Then that sound ceased too.

"What's that?" cried Svetlana anxiously. "D'you hear? Is that another fall? It must have broken that tube, too."

"No," I said aloud. "They've switched off the compressed air from outside. That's to let us know that rescue is at hand."

I was right, as it appeared. A minute or two later the hissing started again, only to stop and start again at regular intervals.

I sat close to Trifonov, shoulder to shoulder. The fact that he was near me helped me to preserve at least an outward calm.

"Andrei," Trifonov said quietly, "what's that story Kramov told about you getting drunk?"

The question was so unexpected in those circumstances that I started. Twenty-four hours had passed since I made that speech at the meeting—hours of hard work, of great peril. Naturally there had been no time to discuss the meeting.

Had Trifonov asked me that question in ordinary surroundings I would probably have felt ashamed. But now I was actually overjoyed to hear it, for his words brought me back to the ordinary course of everyday life.

Speaking in undertones I told him how I had dropped into the "washer" and how I had found myself in Kramov's room that night.

"But why didn't you explain that to the meeting?" Trifonov asked me.

I shrugged.

"What could I have explained? The facts were there."

"Well, listen," said Trifonov, "you go tomorrow to the Regional Party Committee and see Baulin. He remembers you well. Tell him all your doubts about Kramov."

"Tomorrow?" exclaimed Svetlana suddenly with a bitter laugh.

"Tomorrow?"

"Well, the day after tomorrow," replied Trifonov quietly.

It was becoming more and more difficult to breathe. My temples throbbed, my ears buzzed. I didn't want to speak or move. I didn't want to do anything. With a great effort I turned and pressed my forehead to the cold, wet wall of the gallery. And at that moment I heard Svetlana's broken whisper:

"Andrei, I'm going to faint."

"Svetlana dear, courage," I whispered. "We'll soon be rescued, I'm certain of it."

"Yes, perhaps . . . but we'll be dead by then."

"Hush! Don't you dare say such things," I said, raising my voice slightly. "You ought to be ashamed of yourself. I'm sure they've got at least half-way to us from the other side."

"Oh, you're sure, are you?" said Svetlana bitterly. She was silent for a while.

"Andrei, I've no air to breathe," I heard her whisper.

I realized that she was really feeling very bad. It was not merely fright or bewilderment but she just could not breathe.

"Svetlana, darling, courage," I entreated her.

"Andrei, we'll never get out of here, I know it."

"Engineer Odintsova, stop talking nonsense," I cut

her short, to my surprise speaking at the top of my voice.

Svetlana fell silent.

I heard the sound of water dropping heavily and evenly.

"We must get to work!" Trifonov cried suddenly.

"You're fooling yourself," Svetlana cut in. "Do you think you'll be able to do anything with shovels and scoops? Either they'll save us from outside or we'll all—"

"Cut that out!" Nesterov broke in rudely. "You're not the parish priest, young lady, and it's too soon to be burying us. Let's go."

He rose, picked up a shovel and walked slowly off, dragging the shovel behind him. The others got up too. Svetlana and Avilov were the only ones who did not move.

I went over to Avilov and turned the faint beam of my lamp on his face. He was breathing heavily. His lips were covered with a white slime. Sweat dripped down his face.

"Avilov," I said, bending down to him, "try to get to your feet. We must dig if we want to get out of here."

"We won't get out!" he muttered panting.

"Yes, we shall. I tell you we shall. Have I ever deceived you? Don't pay attention to what Odintsova's saying. We'll all get out of here. We've all got big things to do out there. Surely you're not going to take this lying down, without a struggle? Get to your feet!"

Avilov staggered slowly to his feet. All except Svetlana went to the wall of rock to resume the digging. We dug in grim silence. There was in our movements none of the desperation of men who feel doomed and seek forgetfulness in some useless activity. But we worked slowly, far too slowly.

Gasping for breath we bumped against each other, our shovels struck sparks as they rang against the rock.

I have no idea how long we worked—an hour, three hours, eight hours. When, on the verge of collapse, we finally stopped we had driven a narrow passage into the fallen rock.

With our last bit of strength we shored it up with timber props. Then we went back to the face for a brief rest.

"Svetlana," I called when we returned. There was no reply. Fumbling in the dark, I felt her shoulder and bent over her. "We've dug a long way, five metres at least. After a little rest we'll get on with the digging again."

She did not reply. I could hear her heavy breathing. None of us had the strength to speak.

Suddenly I heard the sound of splitting timber and the clatter of falling rock.

Instinctively we pressed closer to the wall. The noise died down.

"What's that?" Svetlana asked in a faint voice.

Trifonov rose. We could hear him stumbling farther and farther away in the darkness. He returned and whispered in my ear:

"It's all crashed. The props gave way."

I clutched his arm hastily. "Quiet." Had the others heard, I wondered?

Hitting my foot against a rail, I rose with an effort and made my way to the place where the rock had fallen. When I had first walked there the distance between the face and the scene of the crash had measured three hundred and fifty paces. And now, after I had gone three hundred and twenty steps, my outstretched hands came up against a wall of rock. The new crash had done more than destroy the results of our recent efforts—a nearer section of rock had collapsed, rock which I had consid-

ered solid and reliable. The wall cutting us off from the outer world had grown many feet thicker.

I was overcome with despair. Bruising my hands on sharp bits of rock, I felt the wall from top to bottom, from one side to the other, nursing the secret hope that it was not solid. At any other time such a hope would have seemed stupid to me. Then I pressed my ear to the rock. All I could hear was the gurgle of a spring somewhere in the darkness.

I staggered back, bumping against the walls, bruising my face and hands.

And as I walked back there was the one thought in my mind: how to tell the others of the new calamity. Half-way back I heard squelching footsteps and the clatter of shovels and crowbars being dragged along the ground.

Here they come, suspecting nothing, I thought. They would reach the wall and find out what I already knew. Their last hope would go. What was I to do?

I was shivering from lack of oxygen, from damp, weariness and the knowledge of the fresh disaster.

"Don't go on, comrades, rest a while," I said hoarsely, as the others reached me.

"No use pretending, Andrei," came Trifonov's feeble voice. "They know everything. You can't hide the truth."

"Then where are you going?"

"To dig. We're not rats. We're not going to let ourselves be suffocated without a struggle. We'll get through. And we know they're digging from the other side. There was never a time when comrades didn't help each other in need," he said defiantly.

I began to breathe more freely. He infected me with his confidence.

I thought how beautiful life was out there in the open and how stupid it was to imagine that it could be lost.

"Are you all here?" I asked.

"Everybody except Svetlana Alexeyevna," said Trifonov. "She's in a pretty bad way."

"Go on, I'll join you straight away," I said.

We parted.

"How are you feeling, Svetlana?" I asked, coming closer to her.

"Is that you, Andrei?" she replied faintly. "Sit down, stay with me. I know what's happened."

She lay slumped against the wall.

"Nothing terrible's happened, Svetlana. We didn't shore up the roof properly and the timbering's crashed down. What difference can another two or three metres make? I've figured it out. They must have covered half of the way from the other side. I'm certain—"

"Andrei, forgive me," she interrupted, "I understand everything. You're good, you're strong. But why did you deceive me?"

Her hands were as cold as the stone on which they lay.

"Svetlana," I cried. "What are you saying? In what way did I deceive you? Well, it may be four and not three metres, but does it really matter so much?"

"I don't mean that, dear, not that," she muttered, her breath coming in laboured gasps. "You made me believe I was someone I'm not. But I'm— I'm really— Oh, how my head aches!"

"Stop it, Svetlana, stop talking like that," I said, losing my self-control.

"Some sun, oh, how I want some sun," Svetlana went on. "This arctic day is a fraud really. It seems eternal but after it comes this night. And after the night a stone trap . . . and it's all up."

"Listen to me, Svetlana," I said desperately. "I wish you'd believe me, just a little bit. I tell you, I swear to you: we'll get out. D'you hear? We'll get out."

"We will, you say? Is that true? D'you really believe that, dear? You're not just saying it to calm me and the others, are you? You do believe it?"

"I do and, what's more, I know it for a fact."

"How wonderful! Now my head doesn't ache half as much. Now, Andrei darling, give me your word of honour...."

"What about?"

"Promise me that if we get out of here everything will be different. We'll go away from this night. We'll go south. What do we want these tunnels for? They'll take the best years of our lives. And then I'll love you always ... always."

She was silent. And all I could hear was the heavy dripping of water somewhere in the darkness.

Rescue came sixteen hours later. And all those hours we had been digging in the pitch darkness.

Only during the last hour, when the pounding of the drills from the outside sounded quite near, did we fling aside our shovels and scoops. The last of our strength was gone. We lay against the wall and every breath rent our throats as though we were inhaling handfuls of needles.

Then the darkness was pierced by a narrow beam of light. It flashed, then went out. But it was enough to give us a fresh surge of strength. We rose to our feet and seized our shovels again. There was at that moment hardly any point at all in our digging. But we were all moved by an unconscious desire to meet our rescuers fighting, tools in hand.

And then ... then the whirr of the drills became a deafening roar, there was a clatter of falling rock and a bright narrow opening lay before us. It was as

though someone had smashed a window with a single blow.

"Answer, whoever's alive!" somebody shouted from the other end.

Then, blotting out the lamp-light for a second with his head and shoulders, a man appeared at the opening. He crawled through, flung himself towards me, and clasped me in his arms. Others came behind him. The gallery was now flooded with light, and then I was astonished to see that the man who held me in his arms was—Kramov.

16

Several things resulted from the accident on our sector.

Firstly, the clearing of the gallery naturally led to a slowing down in our rate of tunnelling.

Secondly, the clash between Kramov and myself somehow receded into the background.

A strong psychological factor in this respect was the fact that Kramov had been the first to break through to us and had thus appeared as the valiant rescuer of his enemy.

In addition it became known that at the moment when Kramov had been thus engaged there had been an accident on the western sector too. Water had finally burst into the gallery from the subterranean reservoir. The four pumps could not drain it off and the shift foreman had almost been drowned. The sector had lost five days' work.

All these happenings made us forget about the hectic party meeting. Sizov made no further mention of a possible discussion of my speech by the Bureau. Kramov made the most of his part as chief rescuer. He was friendly with me and under the circumstances I could do nothing but reciprocate.

Thus on the surface Kramov and I were again on good terms. The fact that he was the first to break through to us during the crash could not but dispose me in his favour.

It took Svetlana several days to recover from the shock she received, and she stayed in bed. Complete apathy seemed to have taken possession of her and she was indifferent to everything. I dropped in to see her several times a day, but she did not seem to notice me and avoided my glance as though ashamed of something.

Kramov came to see Svetlana twice and brought her some sweets. He spoke to me as though what had happened had been a sad and foolish misunderstanding. Now it was forgotten and we were again the best of friends. He even invited Svetlana and myself to his birthday party, which he was planning to hold the following Sunday.

Another few days went by. Normal drilling and blasting were resumed on both sectors. The men worked with redoubled efforts, eager to make up for lost time. Svetlana had recovered and was back on the job.

On Sunday evening I went to see her, but found her door locked. She was nowhere to be found on the sector.

A snowstorm was rising, one of those violent snowstorms that herald spring in those parts.

Very late in the evening Agafonov stepped in.

"Forgot to tell you," he began, "Svetlana Alexeyevna left a message for you, said she wouldn't be on the sector today."

And he added:

"She must have gone to the settlement to do some shopping."

This news disturbed me for some reason.

"Stay for a while, Agafonov," I said.

In silence he removed his sheepskin and sat down at the table.

"Supposing Svetlana got caught on the road in the storm," I said anxiously.

"Nothing will happen to her," Agafonov replied calmly. "She'll spend the night at the settlement, in the works hostel, that's all."

Outdoors the wind howled more and more fierce.

"Fyodor Stepanovich," I said, averting my eyes. "It's Kramov's birthday today. He invited me too."

"You did right not to go," was Agafonov's comment. "He's put on sheep's clothing but he has it in for you all the same."

I began pacing the room.

"Wasn't that the front door?" I said, halting in the middle of the room.

No, it was the wind.

"Don't expect her to come in such a storm, she'll stay the night," muttered Agafonov.

I turned to Agafonov, went to the table and sat down facing him.

"Let's talk a little, Agafonov, if you're not in a hurry, I just don't feel like turning in, and I don't want to be alone."

"All right."

We sat in silence.

"What shall we talk about, the drilling?" asked Agafonov.

"Don't joke, Agafonov," I said morosely. "Let's talk about life."

"Life's a big thing, it takes time to learn it."

"You're right, Agafonov. I'm still young in years, but I feel that a whole new world has opened before me. I've been born into this world and brought up in it and yet it's now new and different to me. It is a more difficult world than I imagined. There are more evil

people in it than I thought. But then the good people are not good in an abstract way, but good in a way that I'd never imagined before. There are more sorrows, but then the joys are real. But just at present, Agafonov, I'm in the dumps."

"Aren't you hitting it off with Svetlana?" he asked.

"She's with Kramov," I blurted out.

Agafonov rose slowly to his feet.

"She's with Kramov," I repeated. "I can't, I haven't the right, I won't let her stay there."

I dashed to the coat-rack and snatched my sheepskin.

"Put it back," Agafonov said sternly. "Are you off your head? Where d'you think you're going in a blizzard like this?"

"I must go, Agafonov!" I cried. "I don't give a hang about anything, about Kramov, about my pride. All I know is that I can't leave her there. I love her, do you understand? I love her!"

I rushed out of the house. Eddies of snow swept across the dimly-lit site. They seemed to rise somewhere at the boundary line between light and gloom, and as they spun on, racing across the site, they piled up into a dense wall of snow.

From the mountains the wind bore endless clouds of snow. When the road passed over high ground it was comparatively easy to walk but in the hollows I had to plough through drifts. Sometimes I had to rake the snow with my hands and feet.

I was soon in a sweat, and my damp clothes were crusted with ice. Part of the way I crawled, part I walked with my back to the wind, bending close to the ground, making my way through the wall of wind and snow. Anything to get on!

At last the lights of the western sector loomed into view. A few empty packing-cases, chased by the wind,

and some torn sheets of metal came tumbling by. Flurries of snow whirled across the site like skeletons on stilts. They seemed to be running towards me to blind me and sweep me off my feet.

I headed straight for Kramov's house. When I reached it I flung open the door.

At the very end of a long table on which stood empty wine bottles and plates with half-consumed food sat Kramov and Svetlana. Kramov rose slowly to his feet. He looked pretty drunk.

"W-well, w-well," he muttered, stammering slightly, "better late than never. My guests have gone, b-but I couldn't let Svetlana Alexeyevna go in a storm like this."

Svetlana did not move. She looked at me with surprise and alarm in her wide-open eyes.

"Why don't you sit down?" Kramov continued, pulling himself together and smiling affably. "I guess you're late because of the snowstorm. All the same...."

He picked up bottle after bottle, holding it against the light.

"We'll find something for you to drink...." With outstretched arms he invited me to the table.

I remained standing in the doorway, leaning against the lintel.

"Let's go home, Svetlana," I said.

On hearing her name she came out of her trance and rushing up to me said hurriedly:

"Take off your things, Andrei, you must be frozen, do take them off."

She began wiping the wet snow off my face with a handkerchief and unfastening my sheepskin. Kramov, a little unsteady on his legs, watched us with sardonic curiosity.

I let Svetlana have her way.

"You're not jealous, are you?" Kramov asked in an unexpectedly high-pitched voice. "That's foolish, I asked both of you to the party. Svetlana Alexeyevna came. And you're late. But I'm glad you came all the same. Sit down and have a drink."

With a reeling gait he came towards me but then stopped half-way.

"Don't worry, she doesn't love me," he said in a quiet voice. "I was certain she would learn to love me. But facts are stubborn things. And strange as it may seem, she doesn't."

He shrugged.

"But I love her and you know it. I fell in love with her last summer, when we were returning from the lake, remember? And then there was that evening when you cut your first few metres into the mountains and we went for a walk after the three of us had spent the evening together. We stood on the road and you went into rhapsodies about your love for Svetlana. Then you were offended at my silence, remember? I hated you, I hated you as long ago as that, you milksop. That's all I want to say. Now is everything clear to you?" He spun round and walked to the wall. For a few seconds he stood with his back to me. When he turned round a tipsy smile again played at the corners of his mouth.

"J-jealous, are you?" he asked, winking slyly and shaking a finger at me. "Well, senseless though it may be, it's a natural feeling. It's a sort of survival of capitalist relationships, so to say. Love, love! What do you children know about love? Love is an art. And we've lost its secret, as artists have lost the secret of mixing paints which Leonardo da Vinci possessed. It seemed to us all that to love as people had loved before was wrong. Bourgeois marriage, we said, humiliated the woman. And the position of a kept woman was an outrage. To be unfaithful to your wife, oh no! A public

stigma is attached to unfaithfulness. Love has been turned into a formula. All the time we tried to improve it, with the result that, like rats that lick their young to death, we have killed it. Give us love on a platter, undiluted love. But that kind of love is dull. For both men and women. A man no longer beats his mate, he has been deprived of that right. He does not pay her for a few minutes of pleasure. He goes on living with her though he's tired to death of her, he's afraid to leave her for another because of public censure. And what is the result? Is the woman much happier than she used to be before? Or the man, for that matter? No, friends, there's something very fundamental about love that cannot be ignored. But I suppose," he concluded with a slight grin, "all our misfortunes stem from the imperfections of human nature. We haven't managed to improve it yet. Relations of production lag behind productive forces—the eternal problem. It's an old story. Well, what about a drink, Andrei?"

At that moment I walked up to Kramov, only vaguely conscious of what I intended to do. But as I approached him I realized what my intention was—I swung my arm and punched him in the jaw with all my strength.

He fell to the floor.

"Put your coat on," I said to Svetlana. "Put your coat on at once!"

She stood looking utterly lost, crumpling in her hands the handkerchief which a minute before she had used to wipe my face.

Kramov rose to his feet. Svetlana drew to the wall in fright.

I swung round and went out of the house. I stopped and watched the door for a few minutes, expecting it to open.

But it did not open.

One evening when I was sitting in the office discussing the results of the tunnelling with the mine surveyor, Khomyakov, a shift engineer on the western sector, came in.

Since the day I had happened to overhear Kramov give this man a severe ticking off I had run into Khomyakov several times. Unusually reserved, casual about his clothes, and speaking in a quiet, muffled voice, this engineer made a curious impression on me.

Khomyakov, I could see, was extremely upset about something. Over his quilted jacket he wore a tarpaulin cape with the hood up, almost concealing his small, round head.

"What's the matter, Comrade Khomyakov? Anything wrong on the sector?" I asked anxiously.

"No," he replied, pushing back his hood. "I've a request to make, Comrade Arefyev."

I assumed that he had come to borrow some lengths of tubing, some drills or other tools. But after a brief pause he said:

"It's a personal matter."

He threw a sidelong glance at the mine surveyor. The latter got up and left the room.

Khomyakov waited until the door had closed behind the man.

"Comrade Arefyev, I want you to give me a job."

Seeing that I was taken aback he added hurriedly:

"I'll take any job. I'll work as an engineer, a mine surveyor, a foreman."

That was a surprise. I had always considered Khomyakov to be one of Kramov's meekest and most timid subordinates.

"Sit down, Comrade Khomyakov, and tell me what made you come to this decision," I said.

"I've left my shift," he told me quietly, sitting down on a stool. "Dropped the whole thing and came here. I can't work under Kramov any longer. I'm not an ambitious man. I don't want fame, that's something I'll leave to him. But I'm a human being and not a doormat for him to wipe his feet on."

Usually Khomyakov spoke very quietly, as though in terror of the sound of his own voice, but now he spoke loudly, even shouting some of his words.

"But what happened?"

"I despise myself, honestly despise myself for having stood it for almost a year, for having borne it all in silence. I was scared. But what have I to be scared of?" he was yelling now. "I've worked on fifteen tunnels in my time and I'm an honest man."

He ended on a note of bewilderment: "Yet I was afraid."

"Still I don't understand what's happened, Comrade Khomyakov. Judging from the way you speak you've quarrelled with Kramov."

"No, I haven't quarrelled with him. I've rebelled! I've had enough."

"All the same it's pretty hard to make out what really happened from what you've said."

"Very well, I'll try to explain things. I disobeyed Kramov's order to transfer one of the drillers on my shift to another shift. He happens to be one of the best drillers we have. Then Kramov said in front of everybody that if I did anything of the kind again he would throw me out and leave me without a job. So I've dropped the work and left the sector. But it's not only that. The thing is I can't go on working any longer under a man who is as cruel and callous as Kramov."

"Yet I remember the way he collected all the chairs from the office and brought them to the workers who had nowhere to sit," I said bitterly.

"Eye-wash!" cried Khomyakov. "A crying shame. The very next day they took the chairs back to the office. After all, the people at the office had to have something to sit on. I know very well the time you're speaking of. It was at a party a worker gave, and Kramov was eager to make a good impression. Then the chairs were taken back—trust him. You think he had the interests of the job at heart when he helped you with your compressor and to drive your first heading. The devil he had. He wanted to get his name into the papers. He himself arranged for the reporter to come over to you. He was clever enough to guess that you'd give him the credit for what happened. That's Kramov's method. And that's how it goes on all the time."

Khomyakov could not sit still. His hatred for Kramov obsessed him. His greatest desire now seemed to be to unmask and humiliate Kramov.

"It was on Kramov's orders that Agafonov was waylaid as soon as he appeared in our sector. In my presence Kramov sent for Dronov and said to him, 'Look, Agafonov's going to come here from the eastern sector to nose out things about our quotas. They've set up idiotic quotas for themselves and now they want us to do the same and our earnings to drop.' So Dronov looked out for Agafonov. Kramov's a real trouble-maker," Khomyakov shouted. "But sometimes the game he plays costs people their lives. Why, it was he who killed Zaitsev."

"What grounds have you for saying that?"

"I have grounds, all right. I know that he sent Zaitsev to the telegraph office to wire the ministry that two-thirds of his part of the tunnelling had been completed. He sent him, although he knew that there was a danger of avalanches. I drafted the telegram and the next day the ministry sent a message of congratula-

tions. You remember reading it in the papers, don't you? Kramov got bouquets and Zaitsev—"

With a kind of vengeful intoxication Khomyakov was turning Kramov inside out.

"But he's afraid of you, Arefyev. When you had that accident on your sector, Kramov ordered me not to leave the telephone and to keep him informed of how the rescue work was proceeding. He was at the face—his own gallery, you remember, was in danger of being flooded. When I told him that only three metres remained to be excavated before we reached you, he left the face and dashed over here to pose as chief rescuer. He knew how important it was for him to 'rescue' you in front of everybody. Just then his own gallery was flooded. And its chief, Kramov, whose business at such a moment was to be with his own people and to watch the pressure of the water, dropped everything and rushed off to your sector to stage that rescue show."

"Listen," I said, "what you've told me just now is outrageous. It's not for my ears alone. If you're an honourable man you'll come with me to the works straight away."

At these words the spirit seemed to go out of Khomyakov. His small head shrank into his shoulders.

"Yes You're right, quite right," he muttered, buttoning up his cape. "I'll go at once. I'll go to the works alone, without you. I'll go tomorrow. I'll go after I've thought things over."

He pulled up the hood of his tarpaulin and shuffled out heavily.

Early next morning the man on duty took down the following telephone message: An order from Falaleyev. It ran:

"These are very hectic days for the workers of the tunnel construction job. The time when the two sectors will be linked up is approaching and it brings to a close

the hardest and most responsible stage of the construction work.

"At such a decisive time we demand from every workman, technician and engineer rigid discipline, a cool head, and accuracy in work.

"And it is at such a time that G. V. Khomyakov, shift engineer on the western sector, committed a most serious breach of socialist labour discipline by disobeying an order outright, and, when reprimanded, abandoning the shift and deserting the face.

"Resolutely condemning such actions, which are designed to undermine our work, I order:

"Engineer G. V. Khomyakov to be dismissed and to be put at the disposal of the Personnel Department of the Ministry."

After reading the order I guessed exactly what had happened. Khomyakov's refusal to carry out Kramov's order and his desertion of the job had given Kramov the upper hand over this man and he had straight away rushed to the works.

Kramov realized full well that he had driven Khomyakov to the end of his tether and that in that state the engineer who knew so much about him might prove dangerous.

And that is why Kramov was in a hurry to get the order for Khomyakov's dismissal issued.

Now Khomyakov found himself in the position of defendant. Before exposing Kramov he would have his hands full vindicating himself.

Kramov had, moreover, made sure that Khomyakov would have to leave the locality. The order said: "To be put at the disposal of the Personnel Department of the Ministry." Now of course he would say to Khomyakov, "Better keep your mouth shut if you want to get a decent reference. If you don't you'll never get on your feet again."

But I had not expected Kramov to act with such amazing speed, for I learned that Khomyakov was leaving for Moscow the very next day.

I hurried to the railway station, covering the hundred kilometres in a lorry in less than two and a half hours. When I reached the station the train for Moscow was due to leave in fifteen minutes. I at once caught sight of Khomyakov; he was sitting on his suitcase at the very end of the platform. When he saw me he looked obviously embarrassed. He turned red as he glanced at his watch.

I decided not to stand on ceremony.

"How can you leave like that, Comrade Khomyakov," I cried, "without seeing the matter through, without exposing Kramov!"

Khomyakov's face twitched with pain. He looked round and said half-audibly:

"What can I do? Besides, I'm to blame too. Discipline is discipline, after all."

"Don't you realize"—as I spoke I tried to put all the conviction I felt into my voice—"that a far bigger matter than a breach of discipline is in question? Can't you see that at any other time Kramov would have merely used this offence of yours to tighten his grip on you? But he's afraid of you now, afraid of being exposed. He may even know that you've been to see me."

"He may, yes, he may," Khomyakov repeated indistinctly. "But it is all now a matter of the past. I'm leaving."

"But you have no right to leave now, your duty as a citizen should tell you that. Pull yourself together. Look, you're an honest, experienced engineer and you're letting a mere adventurer ruin your life. Don't leave yet. If only for three days. For one day!"

"You're right," Khomyakov said quietly. "I'm acting

like a coward. I—I hate to admit it. But I am a man well advanced in years and I evidently lost my fighting spirit long ago.”

But then he suddenly seized my hand, drew me up to himself and whispered:

“I tell you what, Arefyev, keep off Kramov. He’ll break you. He’ll ruin the best years of your life. Don’t stand in his way.”

“And let him go on doing his dirty work?” I cried.

“He’s going to leave here soon. He has friends in the ministry. He came to build the tunnel here because he needs a construction job like that in his record. He’ll be leaving for Moscow soon, to work at the head office. You’ll see how well he’ll make all the discomforts he’s suffered in these backwoods repay him. Soon the tunnel will be opened and then—”

We heard a whistle. The train was approaching.

Khomyakov picked up his suitcase and ran to the train. A minute later Khomyakov disappeared into one of the carriages.

18

May is the first month of spring in our parts. A warm wind blows from the south and the snow begins to melt. But when the north wind returns it blows as fiercely as ever; warm days give way to bitterly cold ones, bringing spells of frost that make one wonder whether winter is not back to stay. By the end of May the foothills are cleared of snow. But higher up in the mountains it lies untouched.

Only one bird, the *olyapka*, winters here in the north. And a curious bird it is, the size of a thrush, black except for some white at its breast, a short uptilted tail and long, slender legs. It’s a funny little creature that struts about the heaps of stones, yes, struts, rather than hops. It climbs on to a large, smooth stone, nods its

little head and moves on. In the spring other birds make their appearance, little white ones, slightly bigger than sparrows—snow-buntings. And the northern nightingale sings its song in the undergrowth on the mountain slopes.

But the most wonderful thing of course is the spring sun. It does not appear all at once. At midday the horizon brightens and only then does the sun show itself—but only for a few minutes. Then it stays longer and longer.

And so came the spring that year.

The air was filled with the gurgling of mountain rivers, melting snow streamed down the hillsides, the trees wore a faint green.

I remember one day going to the mountains with Svetlana. By then all was over between us. We sat down on a boulder. I pointed out to her a curiously-shaped fir growing on the mountain slope. At that level the fir has a narrow, almost cylindrical crown. Firs growing higher up on the hillsides are exposed to the wind and look different. Their tops are almost bare but the foliage grows to a thick dome-shaped mass lower down the trunk.

“Do you know what that fir is called?” I asked, “‘a fir in skirts.’ The winds kill the crown, the trunk is denuded of all its boughs, but at the bottom where there’s a protective covering of snow the lower boughs are saved from the destructive north winds. And from the height of the ‘skirts’ you can tell the depth of the snowfall here.”

Svetlana looked up at the trees. They were like weather-cocks. As a rule the trunks are quite bare on the windward side. On the side facing the south they have sparse jutting branches.

The higher the trees grew, the barer they were. They had the hardest time of it clambering up the mountain.

Flayed by the wind, they were finally denuded of every branch.

Near to the summit stood a solitary tree. How had it got all the way there? The winds had punished it for its boldness, whipped it bare and deformed its trunk. It had overrated its strength light-heartedly, climbing up into the wind zone like that. It had fought a losing battle. And now it was dying.

"And the poor thing can't climb down," Svetlana said thoughtfully.

"Human beings have more luck," I replied, "they can retreat as well as advance."

Those were weeks during which, to the exclusion of everything else, we lived in anticipation of the great moment when the west and east galleries would be linked. After that a great deal of work would still remain to be done, such as converting the transverse section of the tunnel for the passage of trains, installing the electrical equipment and the signalling system and laying the track.

But in tunnel building it is when the entire passage is cut that the bulk of the job is regarded as completed and victory is celebrated, both real and symbolic—symbolic for the conquest of the mountain is then complete.

As this victory drew nearer spirits soared high on our sector, for it was our sector to which the works had assigned the task of breaking down the last of the wall of rock between the two galleries.

The question of who would have the privilege—the western or the eastern sector—of blasting the last few metres of rock was much on our minds at that time.

Two or three months before there had been no doubt in anybody's mind that the western sector would be the one to bring down the last of the rock. But as the days passed and week followed week we began overtaking the western sector in the rate of tunnelling.

When the western sector was just fulfilling its quotas we were exceeding them. The impression was that the men on the western sector had worn themselves out. They had gone the limit of what they could do.

It was therefore natural that the works should issue an order giving our sector the privilege of linking the two galleries.

When preparations are made for a family celebration the excitement begins in the morning. In the same way our group was in a state of bustling, joyful and at the same time anxious anticipation when the works' order became known to us.

The shift working at the face when the order was read managed by the end of the working day to show the highest rate of speed ever reached on our sector. A reporter and a photographer from the local newspaper were waiting for the workers at the tunnel entrance.

On the following day reporters from the district and regional newspapers arrived. The managing director of the works came twice during the day. Falaleyev spent hours on end in the tunnel and patted me on the back as though there had been no hard words between us at all. After each shift the mine surveyor took careful measurements of the distance dividing the two galleries.

Which shift would be lucky enough to drill and blast the last metres of rock separating the two galleries? That question was uppermost in the minds of the drillers and loaders.

"How many metres did you do?" each shift asked the one it was replacing. "How many?" the mine surveyor read in the glance of each worker he met. And turning over the figures in his mind each worker hoped that his shift might say, "The tunnel is cut."

With the goal so near and definite, competition between the shifts grew keen. Even the shift watchmen

who stood at the tunnel entrance competed between themselves, counting the number of trucks coming out of the gallery.

At last no more than fifteen metres of rock remained to be blasted. To avoid accidents from blasting operations all work on the western sector ceased.

In the night the mine surveyor reported that there were only twelve metres of rock separating the two galleries.

Although the workers on the night shift knew full well that the morning shift would see the merging of the two galleries, each of them hoped that by some miracle the work would be brought to a finish before the morning. The men thought: What, after all, can prevent the driller from drilling a larger hole and the sapper from tamping more powder into the holes. And who'll care if the walls come down ahead of time?

At last the charge-holes were drilled and the ammonite packed into them. The blasts went off. The ventilators cleared the place of gases and everyone rushed to the face. I ran fast along the gallery but the night shift men and those who had come to replace them got ahead of me. They dashed to the face without waiting for the air to clear—some in the hope that the last of the wall had come down, others that victory had been deferred till their shift.

But the rock wall had not come down yet. The morning shift began its work. Now it was beyond doubt that this shift would see the last five metres of rock separating the two galleries come crumbling down.

Both those who worked and those who watched the work were silent. At midday as I looked around I noticed that all the chiefs from the works had gathered at the face. The managing director, Falaleyev, and the Secretary of the Party organization stood a little apart

from the rest, not wanting to distract the workers by their presence or questions.

I was amazed not to see Svetlana there. I had discovered her absence suddenly and couldn't remember how many hours had passed since we last met.

It seemed to me that she had only just been there. But then on reflection I realized that I was wrong. As far as I could recall Svetlana had not shown up in the gallery since the previous evening. I thought she might be sleeping after her shift and decided to send someone to let her know that the wall separating the galleries was about to come down.

I can't remember whether I actually sent someone or in the heat of the excitement forgot to. Whether I did or not is immaterial now.

Agafonov and Nesterov were the drillers on that shift.

A few hours before, when the preceding shift was finishing its work, Agafonov had stood behind the drillers watching them at work.

From time to time he left his place and, squelching in the puddles in his rubber boots, rushed to the workers of his shift standing in a knot at the entrance.

Agafonov now stood at the face with clenched teeth, having become one with the chattering drill and looking like a gunner determined to stand to the last.

He had stripped to the waist and his body was heavily powdered with the grey rock-dust.

All at once he lurched forward and, still gripping the drill, fell with his chest against the face.

The next instant he recovered his balance and shouted: "Fellows, the drill's gone right through!"

He drew his drill out of the rock. Everyone rushed forward trying to take a peep through the small drill-hole. Then Agafonov picked up a compressed-air tube and began to slip it into the aperture. Someone on the other side must have caught it and given it a tug, for

the tube jerked out of Agafonov's grip and snaked through the hole.

I caught hold of the end of the tube, put it to my lips and shouted:

"Hey, comrades of the western sector, are you there?"

And as I held the end of the tube to my ear I heard a muffled sound like a voice coming up a well.

"I can hear them, I can hear them!" I cried.

One after another the men snatched the tube from me to speak with the other side, joking and congratulating each other.

Nothing had really changed in the gallery. The electric light burned as dimly as ever, drops of water gleamed on the stone walls and stalactites of whitish mould hung from the roof. Yet we felt so elated that the gallery seemed transformed before our eyes into a bright and beautiful place.

Agafonov, I think, was the first to realize that we were wasting precious time.

He snatched the tube and shouted into it:

"Clear out of the gallery, comrades! We're going to blast. We'll be with you in an hour."

The drilling was done at last. When the sappers took over we all hurried out of the gallery.

"Feeling nervous?" the managing director asked me.

"Very."

"Well, that's natural."

"What worries me is whether Kramov has got all his men clear out of the gallery."

"Of course," the managing director replied, adding, "but Kramov isn't there any more."

"What do you mean?" I cried.

"He left before you had a chance to have it out with him," said the managing director wryly. "A telegram came from the head office for Kramov to report to

the ministry without delay. He's getting a new appointment. He's left today."

Quick work! After Khomyakov's departure the commission which had investigated the facts relating to Zaitsev's death and had passed a verdict in favour of Kramov had reopened the inquiry. I recalled that when I went to the managing director to tell him what I had found out about Kramov from Khomyakov he had said:

"There are various rumours. We must investigate them." Evidently Khomyakov had spoken to other of his suspicions.

And now Kramov was gone. A fine thing!

"What about Zaitsev's death?" I asked aloud.

The managing director shrugged his shoulders.

"We'll send the results of the investigation to the head office."

"Gone! Run off! Got cold feet!"—hammered in my brain.

When Agafonov caught up with me I snatched his hand:

"Kramov's gone, run off! The ministry sent for him!"

"Good riddance!" said Agafonov. "The air'll be purer without him around." It was clear that his thoughts were far from Kramov and everything connected with him.

My thoughts again turned to Svetlana. I could hardly believe that she was not with us. How could she keep to her room at such a time?

I must go and fetch her here, I thought. Part of the labour put into this tunnel is hers. How can she miss the joy of being here now!

Yet I am not writing what I really thought. Deep down in my heart I had the horrifying suspicion that Svetlana had left with Kramov. At the same time I hoped that that

suspicion was unfounded, and still believed that the gulf between us could be bridged.

In a turmoil of mixed thoughts and emotions I ran out of the gallery and hurried to the house.

The house was empty. All its occupants had gone to the tunnel and were crowded round its entrance.

The door of Svetlana's room was ajar.

I knocked. There was no answer. I opened the door wider. The light was on but there was no sign of Svetlana. I glanced at the corner where Svetlana kept her suitcases. They were gone.

On the table lay a letter addressed to me. I tore open the envelope.

"My dear and ever beloved Andrei," Svetlana wrote, "I'm leaving by the night train. I'm doing this quietly, without any fuss. Forgive me but I hadn't the courage to say good-bye to you. You see I had no courage even for that.

"I've deceived you once before and now I'm deceiving you again. After all what difference does once more or once less make? I've deceived you intentionally and unintentionally, Andrei. The first time was when I came here and believed that I really wanted to come.

"But I soon realized that it was only my intentions that were good. I realized this when winter came, when the wind began to howl, when Zaitsev was found dead, when the tunnel caved in. I realized then that my one desire, Andrei, was to run away, to get back to the life I was accustomed to, where after a mad ski run I could rest among friends and be happy. I realized all that but said nothing to you. And that was the second time I deceived you.

"But I never deceived you nor myself in that I love you and want to love you always. Yet I have no strength for such a love. I realized that to love you would mean to doom myself to everlasting storms, blizzards and

dangers. And again, I haven't the strength for that sort of life, Andrei.

"Now about Kramov. On that terrible night you asked me if I loved him. I'll answer that question now. No, my dear Andrei, I do not love him, what's more, I despise him. And yet it seemed to me that I was more at ease with him than with you, that he was more my type.

"I felt this way soon after I met Kramov and it frightened me. That was the reason why afterwards I avoided him and drove him away. But in vain. He saw through me at once, he knew that I was not the person I wanted to be. And as usual he played to win. I don't want to blame Kramov for anything—that would be rather mean in the circumstances. But I want you to remember one thing and that is that I know now the difference between you and Kramov.

"I don't want to go on writing about Kramov. And I can't. I love you. And if there was a God I would pray to him to give me strength for such love. But there is no God and it would be useless to rely on my own strength.

"I have no plans and don't know where I'm going. Yet go I must. I am not deserting. I have the managing director's permission to go. You can ask him if you like. The managing director realized what I was going through. But the fact that I have permission to go doesn't change the situation.

"Forgive and forget me, Andrei. Your Svetlana."

I stood rooted to the ground. It seemed to me that time had come to a standstill and that everything in Svetlana's room was dead.

Then suddenly I heard the blasts and dashed out of the room.

I rushed into the gallery and overtook the men who against all regulations were running to the face, which was still shrouded in the poisonous dust raised by the blast. I forgot everything—the letter I had just read,

Svetlana, Kramov, everything on earth. My eyes smarting, I peered into the grey curtain of rock-powder. Had they cut through to the other side? Had the two galleries been joined? I could tell that they had from the way the dust was moving—not towards the men but away from them, slowly disappearing into the opening that had been cut.

But I wanted to make sure with my own eyes that we had got through. I was about to dash through the pall of rock-powder. But everybody suddenly stopped short. From the slowly dispersing dust appeared the smudgy face and tousled head of a man who had thrust himself half-way through the hole and was surveying our crowd with a somewhat lost and questioning look.

And for just an instant the men on our side gazed in the same questioning way. But then someone cried:

“Hurrah!”

The man was seized under the arm-pits and literally dragged through the opening into the eastern sector. And now everybody could see above the heap of rock a large opening through which faces were peering, lit up by the glow of the safety-lamps.

All at once the men, one after another, began crawling over to the other side, hurriedly helping each other, bruising their heads and knees against the sharp splinters of rock.

Someone grabbed me by the shoulders and shook me. There were handclasps all around.

“Arefyev!” I heard the managing director call from somewhere. “Say something, it’s your great day!”

“Comrades!” I shouted.

But words failed me. No speech came. Nor was any speech necessary.

Falaleyev yelled:

“Hurrah for the tunnel-builders!” Everybody caught

up the words and it seemed that even the stone walls of the tunnel were shouting.

Unperceived I elbowed my way out of the gallery. There was not a soul outside. Nobody except myself. It was a warm day and all the windows of the house in which I lived were flung wide open, all except one. In Svetlana's empty room, I knew, the light was burning though it was daytime; the blind was lowered.

Suddenly I felt an arm flung round my shoulders. I started, and on turning round saw Trifonov and Agafo-
nov before me.

"You're behaving badly, lad," Agafo-
nov rebuked me cheerfully, "running off and leaving the men at such a moment!"

"She's gone, comrades," I said softly.

"I know that," Agafo-
nov mumbled, "I carried her bags to the lorry yesterday. Forget her, she's not worth remembering. There's something rotten in her heart," he continued bitterly. "I don't think so very much of the youth of today. There you have a girl who's been brought up in Soviet times. But what has she got to show for herself? Come into the tunnel. They're waiting for you there."

Slowly I raised my eyes to Agafo-
nov's face and mut-
tered:

"It's not as simple as that. She's not here any more. But I love her. I still love her."

"She's no good, I tell you," Agafo-
nov said. "I blame her for what she's done to you. She's robbed you of a year of life, she's tormented you."

"A year of life?" cried Trifonov, who had so far kept silent. "Nonsense. That year of life, if you want to know, has been his big year."

"Comrade Arefyev," Nesterev was calling from the entrance to the tunnel, "what are you doing out there? The men are asking for you."

For a few seconds I went on silently staring at Svetlana's black window. Then we went into the tunnel.

* * *

A traveller treads the road, stumbling, falling, losing strength with each step; in his mind there is but one thought—the road is long. He reaches the end with a failing heart and eyes that are dead. He has followed the road because it was there for him. And it has led him nowhere.

But there are those who are masters of the road they tread. They walk on in rain and sun, through forests, through mountains, through tunnels of their own making. They, too, stumble and fall, they get hurt; the sun sees their smiles and the wind dries their tears.

But those people know why and where they are going. And every minute along the road, every year of their lives enriches their souls, stimulates their desires and sharpens their vision.

These are the people I want to travel with.

To the Reader

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